

BRANCOS FIRST: RESULTS FROM FIRST TWO YEARS

THE CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON INSTRUCTIONAL CHANGE IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

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Supported by a \$3.2 million First In The World grant from the US Department of Education, the Broncos FIRST project is now in its third year of supporting the success of Pell eligible students at Western Michigan University (WMU). Through a uniquely designed first-year experience, Broncos FIRST students are deeply exposed to myriad student support services that WMU offers and to a curriculum that challenges students to explore personal motivations, expectations of college, and purpose of mentorship.

Student performance and persistence,¹ especially among low-income students,² has been a concern of various stakeholders.³ The need for innovation in student support projects⁴ has borne a resurgence of research in student success practices. This is especially pertinent at WMU. As of Spring 2017, over 7,400 WMU students (31%) were eligible for federal Pell grants, making WMU a living laboratory.

Broncos FIRST is one step towards applying previous research in an innovative fashion to help bolster low-income student performance and persistence. This four-year, quasi-experimental project offers a national model of institutional change toward a common goal of student success.

Broncos FIRST Guiding Influences

Broncos FIRST is influenced a combination of Tinto's⁵ *Theory of Student Departure* and Kuh's *What Matters to Student Success Model*.⁶ Combined, these guiding influences

indicate that individual factors, social and academic engagement, and motivation influence academic performance and college retention. Therefore, we developed an instrument to capture students' levels of social engagement,⁷ perceptions of social & financial support,⁸ grit,⁹ and academic integration.¹⁰ Importantly, each factor could be influenced by the institution for better outcomes.⁶

Broncos FIRST Project Structure

The Broncos FIRST project has two main parts. First, students enroll in a year-long first year experience, designed to help them identify various services across campus that could widely assist their needs and encourages self-reflection college motivations and behavior. Supplementing the FYE, innovatively Broncos FIRST students are also randomly sorted into one of two mentioning experiences.

In Professional Learning Communities (PLC) students meet with WMU staff and faculty. PLCs utilize action research guided by the student voice to initiate grassroots organizational change.

Community mentors are expected to build relationships with each other with the belief that stronger networks within the community should result in various benefits to WMU and the wider community. The experience of Broncos FIRST is designed to influence student behavior, performance, and persistence towards graduation.

BRANCOS FIRST: A CONDUIT OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The Broncos FIRST project goes beyond direct student service to engage the institution in transformational change to increase student success outcomes. Mechanisms for change include:

The Professional Learning Communities experience connects previously isolated student success initiatives on campus by creating a community of faculty, staff, administrators, and students engaged in shared action to increase student persistence. To date, two projects have been completed and four institution wide projects are in process.

Student Success Speaker Series and Student Success Summits, developed based on a University-wide student success survey connected institutional stakeholders presenting innovative student success initiatives across campus.

The WMU Student Support Program and Services Directory, a comprehensive resource of student support programs throughout campus was compiled during Broncos FIRST data collection. The directory is available online and is listed as an institutional *Point of Pride*.

INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

- 286 total summit participants
- 6 seminars
- 1,096 employee survey responses
- 505 Student participants
- 40 PLC members
- 46 Community mentors

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4. Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
5. Center for Postsecondary Research. (2015, March 20). *About NSSE*. Retrieved from <http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm>
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7. Gloria, A.M., et al. (1999). African American student's persistence at a predominantly white university: Influences of social support, university comfort, and self-beliefs. *Journal of College Student Development*, (May/June, 1999), 257-268.
8. Juliani, A. J. (n.d.). *Measuring the Immeasurable: GRIT in education*. Retrieved from <http://ajjuliani.com/measuring-the-immeasurable-grit-in-education/>
9. Draper, S. (2008, February). *Tinto's Model of Student Retention*. Retrieved from <http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/located/tinto.html>

BRNCOS FIRST HELPS STUDENTS SUCCEED

Using two years of data ($N=224$ students) – Control ($n=115$) and Treatment ($n=109$) – we have found that the BF experience positively affects college goals, perceptions of mentorships and support available, self-efficacy and resilience – as well as academic performance.

Students who engaged with the Broncos FIRST experience, reported pre-to-post experience **growth** in:

- Developing a clearer sense of what they wish to accomplish in college and engage in mentoring relationships ($M_{BF}=0.48$, $M_{Control}=0.16$)
- Feeling more deeply emotionally, socially, and financially supported than when they first entered ($M_{BF}=0.12$, $M_{Control}=0.02$)
- Possessing greater levels of self-efficacy and resiliency ($M_{BF}=0.12$, $M_{Control}=0.08$)

Across each scale, BF students experienced **greater gains** than did the Control students. Current findings trend toward significance.

Broncos FIRST **positively** influences:

- Second-Semester GPA:
 - BF Second Semester GPA = 2.65
 - Control Second Semester GPA = 2.47
- First-Year GPA:
 - BF First-Year GPA = 2.82
 - Control First-Year GPA = 2.71

Across both years, **76% of BF treatment students remain in good standing at the end of the first-year** - whereas 70% of control students remain in good standing.

- Second-Year cohort experienced profound leaps, as **79% of BF students remained in good standing** versus **65% of Control students**.

OVERALL TAKEAWAY –The Broncos FIRST experience is helping students become more

- **Capable of focusing on college going-goals**
- **Perceptive of campus and social supports**
- **Confident in their capabilities**

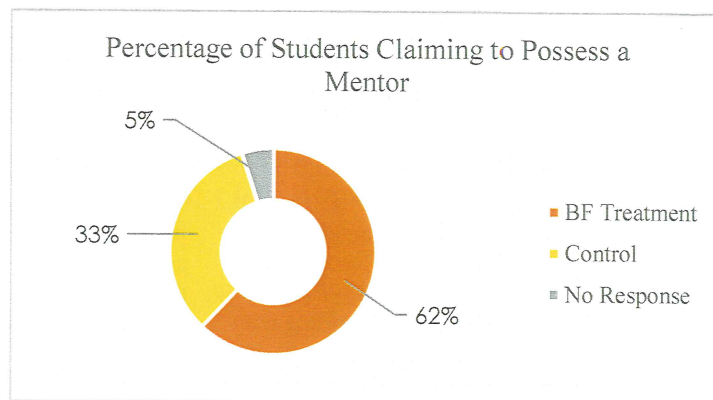
Changes in these beliefs and behaviors may contribute to the GPA boosts – thus, linking with higher rates of **good standing** which is a **critical component of student retention**.

PLC PROJECTS INCLUDE

- Development of a publication and presentations regarding the concept of student belonging at WMU.
- Provided policy recommendations to the Office of Financial Aid on new ways to assist upperclass students with unmet need, leading to the development of the Student Success Initiative
- The development of a series of student success workshops and online resources for the Office of Faculty Development

Male Student (PLC) - "I am starting to build great relationships with the PLC members... Each [meeting] has also helped me with things outside of the class. One thing that is working well is the time management we worked on in the last meeting. A big contributor is that we filled out our planners with info from our classes."

RESEARCH ON POST-FIRST YEAR PERSISTING STUDENTS



Mentorship influences behavior and beliefs and those with mentors report **stronger**:

- Developmentally focused relationships with faculty and staff
- Engagement with peers
- Mental preparedness for academic challenges

BRNCOS FIRST BRINGS THE CAMPUS CLOSER AND PEOPLE THINKING ABOUT STUDENT SUCCESS!

CRICPE has hosted three BF Student Success Summits. These experiences garner an average of 95 attendees per summit. Attendees represent a variety of institutional stakeholders. Attendance of BF Student Success Summits FA'16-FA'17:

- Staff – 143 (52%)
- Faculty – 57 (21%)
- Administration – 43 (15%)
- Students – 34 (12%)

Data from the BF Student Summits survey indicates the experience:

- **Is a valuable professional development opportunity** ($M=3.54/4.00$)
 - "Proactively support less advantaged students in particular - be mindful of their non-academic challenges and think of ways to accommodate/help" – Administrator, WMU Employed, 16+ Years
- **Provides useful information to improve student interaction** ($M=3.39/4.00$)
 - "I plan to incorporate the consolidated list of support services for students into the student success contract developed for a course I am teaching" – Faculty/Instructor, WMU Employed 11-15 Years
- **Is a means of meeting and staying connected with colleagues outside of their normal professional network** ($M=3.13$ of Likert Scale of 4)
 - "The networking that this event provides each semester is worth the time - I haven't been to a summit on campus that has been more useful for that reason alone!" – Staff, WMU Employed Less Than 5 Years

Female Student (CM) - "I feel that he understands my position because he was in my shoes at one point. He is a first-generation college student like me, so he knows the pressure I feel for me to succeed. My mentor and I have discussed many things. He has offered to introduce me to many of his connects that work on campus, so I can get more exposure."