

Creating HOPE: A Holistic Model to Increase Belonging Among Parenting Students

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Abstract

Background/Context: The Holistic Oasis for Parents’ Education (HOPE) Program is an on-campus summer program designed to serve the whole student with a three-dimensional support model. Low-income, Black, and Hispanic parents experienced some of the most egregious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which reflects the demographics of one in three Hostos Community College students. This five-year National Science Foundation grant-funded research program provides crucial support and research on an underserved and understudied group in higher education: pregnant and parenting students.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this paper is to describe the history and context of parenting students at Hostos Community College, to describe the HOPE three-dimensional (3D) model, to provide some preliminary findings on belonging from our first two cohorts, and to share challenges and future directions.

Research Design: This study utilizes a mixed methods approach that includes qualitative and quantitative research with each HOPE cohort of parenting students and quantitative research with a quasi-control group of parenting students.

Conclusion/Recommendations: The research on belonging from the first two years of the HOPE Program demonstrates a positive sense of belonging to the program and to their peers in the program. The HOPE 3D model stands as an example of effective holistic programming for pregnant and parenting students but could be adopted or adapted for other groups of underrepresented students.

Acknowledgments

The National Science Foundation (Award #2135805) supports funding for this research project and program interventions. Opinions reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the granting agency. We would also like to thank our HOPE Program Scholars (2022 and 2023) for their commitment to the program and participation in our research, our co-principal investigator Dr. Biao Jiang, our consultants Maribel Hernandez Ramos and Joseph Gullo, our external evaluator Dr. Katherine Rowell, Drs. Trevor Perri and Ria Banerjee for their editorial assistance, and the editors of *Teachers College Record*.

Keywords: parenting students, adult learners, community colleges, two-generation, 2Gen, belonging

Since 1968, Hostos Community College (HCC), located in the South Bronx, has provided childcare resources for its parenting students,¹ but in March 2020 our physical campus shut down almost entirely for one year as COVID-19 ripped through the Bronx and the other four boroughs of New York City. One in five college students in the United States are also parents, and at Hostos, parenting students were among the worst impacted—they became isolated from a community of learners, they lost childcare resources that became unavailable during the pandemic, public schools closed, and their own academic careers slowed.

Pregnant and parenting students were catapulted into a new reality in which they had to manage young children at home, school-aged children taking online classes from home, and their own online classes. These parents inspired the creation of the Hostos Oasis for Parents' Education (HOPE) Program's three-dimensional (3D) model and a subsequent proposal to the National Science Foundation for a five-year research grant to fund the HOPE Program. This 3D model addresses the problems we observed our students facing: the lack of childcare and resulting "time poverty"² in parenting students, their sense of isolation as they went through college in classes with students who were not parents, and their knowledge gap about the resources that were available at the college, based in part on a lack of outreach to this particular subset of the student population. Accordingly, we provided summer programming for school-aged children for parenting students taking classes, hosted regular lunch-and-learn events to

¹ For a nuanced discussion about the importance of terminology and Title IX law, please see Autumn Green's 2022 "Student Parents or Parenting Students? Why Terminology Matters."

² Wladis et al. (2018) surveyed discretionary time among parenting students at the City University of New York (CUNY) and used "time poverty" to describe their findings.

connect them to college resources, and offered other community-building opportunities that eased the stresses particular to this group of students.

This paper will provide an overview of the history and context of parenting students at HCC, describe the HOPE 3D model, provide preliminary data and analysis, share key insights learned after two years of programming, and outline challenges and future research.

A Brief History of Parenting Students at Hostos Community College

Hostos opened in 1968 and nearly closed in 1976. The City University of New York (CUNY) chancellor, Dr. Robert J. Kibbee, proposed to close Hostos (and two other CUNY colleges) to reduce budget shortfalls and to incorporate HCC students into Bronx Community College. In response, two groups formed to organize against the closure, and their tactics included a takeover of the 475 Grand Concourse Building. Ramón J. Jiménez, a Harvard Law graduate, adjunct professor, and activist, led the Community Coalition to Save Hostos (CCSH) in the 1970s and recalls, “The President’s Office was immediately occupied, and later became a daycare center for students with children” (2003, p. 106).

The image of children sitting in the president’s office is poignant. Their parents and neighbors were risking arrest to keep the doors of HCC open in the face of higher-education austerity. Hostos was and is the only college or university in the United States named after a Puerto Rican and the only bilingual college on the East Coast. Gerald Meyer, founding faculty member at Hostos and chair of the Save Hostos Committee (SHC), described that after the CCSH takeover,

Students with experience working in restaurants made the appliances in the excellent cafeteria in the 500 Building functional so that every evening the thirty- to forty-

member core of HU/HU [Hostos United/Hostos Unido] ate dinner together. . . . A child-care facility was organized; so for the first time in Hostos's history, Hostos's students who had preschool-age children could attend class unworried about their children's care. (2003, p. 85)

Jiménez describes an event during the occupation that included more than 500 children who shouted, "Save Hostos—We too want to go to College!" as they encircled the college (2003, p. 107). From its earliest days, parenting students and children were a package at HCC.

The Hostos Children's Center opened in 1984 and today enrolls nearly 100 children from infancy to five years old. Hostos remains a place where pregnant and parenting students seek higher education. It is one of seven community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY). In the CUNY 2022 Student Experience Survey, 29% of Hostos students indicate they have children they are financially supporting, which is highest among CUNY community colleges (18%) and higher than the university (13%). Forty-five percent (45%) of Hostos students who report dependents indicate the dependents are under the age of five years old, the smallest percentage among all the CUNY community colleges; no Hostos respondents indicate that they use the on-campus childcare center (CUNY, 2022b). It is important to note that Hostos students tend to be older, on average, than other CUNY students. In the 2022 fall cohort, 1,840 out of 4,303 (42.75%) degree-seeking students were 25 years of age or older (CUNY, 2022a). When setting up the HOPE Program, we speculated that many parenting students are using off-site childcare, including family or kinship networks, and that a greater percentage of parenting students have school-aged children.

The activists in the 1960s–1970s focused on access to on-campus food and childcare for HCC students, and these remain primary needs for this population of students today. As at other

campuses across the country, HCC's food providers were slow to return after the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2022, Hostos students and faculty protested the continued closure of the on-campus food services, which had still not reopened (Custodia, 2022). Food service resumed in January 2023, but as of January 31, 2024, HCC has again been without a food provider due to declining revenues for the contracted food provider. This poses urgent issues of access to food. The 15th congressional district, where Hostos is located, was projected to be the congressional district with the highest total number of people in food-insecure households (215,690), the highest total number of children in food-insecure households (88,270), and the highest food insecurity rate among children (43.9%) (Hake et al., 2020, p. 3). Hostos ranked the highest among CUNY community colleges in food insecurity with 41% of respondents indicating that it was "sometimes true" that "the food that (I/we) bought just didn't last, and (I/we) didn't have money to get more" and 15% indicating "often true" for a total of 56% compared to the CUNY community college averages of 36% and 10%, respectively, and compared to university averages of 31% and 9% (CUNY, 2022b). The Hostos Single Stop Program began in 2011 and includes a food pantry with weekly opportunities for students to pick up groceries. The Hostos Empowering Student Parents Program began in 2014 (renamed the Hostos Family Empowerment Program as of 2019) and provides food vouchers and other resources for pregnant and parenting students.

During the 2020 lockdown and the aftermath, parenting students did not bring their young children to daycare, and many school-aged children were doing remote learning in spring 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021. Thus, parenting students were often taking remote classes themselves, watching young children, and/or helping school-aged children with their online classes at the same time. These challenges, although systemic, were often framed by parenting students as individual issues (i.e., lacking proper study skills and time management) and by

institutions as signaling a need for more online classes to provide greater “flexibility” as colleges and entire systems struggled with dramatically declining enrollments and shrinking budgets.

The HOPE Program runs counter to both assumptions and is grounded in the history of the college—children should be central to how we operate, and the physical college space should be a welcoming space for parenting students and their children. Many parenting students have excellent study skills and time management skills; what they lack is discretionary time. Online courses are not the only answer for parenting students, and many parenting students want their classes to be in person. The HOPE Program provides in-person, on-campus programming for parenting students and their children that allows both populations to make full use of college resources, and it aims to foster a sense of belonging and community. This is in line with the college’s history-making intervention in the landscape of U.S. higher education.

HOPE’s Three-Dimensional Interventions for Parenting Students

According to Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn’s comprehensive look at two-generation programs—meaning programs that focus on both parenting students and their children—the concept was introduced with the launch of Head Start in 1965 (2014, p. 13). “Two-Generation 1.0” programs in the 1980s and 1990s were primarily welfare-to-work programs that provided basic education for parents and childcare as two separate units or silos, whereas “Two-Generation 2.0” programs have “a renewed and explicit focus on promoting the human capital of low-income parents and children in the same program” (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014, p. 161). The HOPE Program is a Two-Generation 2.0 program that provides services equally to parenting students and to their children in the same space, on the same physical college campus. This not only aligns with best practices in contemporary education theory, but also cements the historic connection between the college, its activists, and its parenting students by prioritizing the

needs of the parenting students' families with the HOPE 3D model that includes family support, academic support, and professional support.

Many studies on parenting college students call for campus childcare (Austin & McDermott, 2003; Duquaine-Watson, 2007; Wladis et al., 2018). The lack of convenient, affordable, and safe childcare is one of the most salient barriers for parenting students. In a 2018 qualitative study among single-mother college students, participants called for the creation of child-friendly activities, study space for college parents, and flexibility of academic programs (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Student parents are more likely than nonparents to leave college without a degree or certificate. After six years of enrollment, 32.5% of parenting students obtained a college degree or certificate compared to 53.2% of nonparents (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 3). Adult learners and parenting students have higher grade-point averages than traditional college students and nonparent college students (Nelson et al., 2013, p. 1, citing the Institute for Policy Research's 2008 study). In a study conducted at the CUNY of over 15,000 student parents, "qualitative and quantitative measures of time poverty explained 39.5% and 81.6% of differences in college persistence and momentum, respectively, for students with children under six versus those with older or no children, before controlling for other covariates (e.g., gender, age). After controlling for other covariates, they explained 64.7% and 100% of differences in college persistence and momentum, respectively, for parents versus nonparents" (Wladis et al., 2018, p. 824). In conceptualizing the HOPE Program, we sought to address a variety of needs through our HOPE 3D model by focusing on family support, academic support, and professional support.

Family Support

Addressing the needs of parenting students means paying close attention to practical details with a priority on childcare. Parenting students enrolled in the HOPE Program (HOPE Scholars) begin summer courses while their elementary-aged children are still in school because of a discrepancy between university and city school calendars. Infants and pre-K children are dropped off at the Hostos Children's Center while most parents take a three-hour morning summer course Monday through Thursday in the months of June and July (Hostos's extended summer session). Approximately three weeks into the HOPE Program, the HOPE STEM Academy commences the day after New York City public schools complete their school year, and school-aged children come to campus to participate in their own programming while their parents are in college classes. Parenting students can bring all their children ages 11 and under to campus with them for the entire summer session.

The HOPE STEM Academy was created as a free, on-campus summer program for the children (ages 5–11) of HOPE Scholars. Many HOPE Scholars were already utilizing the Hostos Children's Center to provide childcare for children ages six weeks to four years old, so the HOPE Program paid summer tuition for the babies, toddlers, and pre-K children. Many parents had concerns about the types of learning losses their children experienced during the pandemic as well as other concerns about weight gain, screen time, fear, and lack of opportunities for “kids to be kids” and to socialize with their peers, and they were relieved to find a safe, supportive summer program for their school-aged children.

Family support also took the form of healthy breakfasts and lunches. An outside catering company, Great Performances, provided healthy breakfasts and lunches for our participants and staff each day of the program. This intervention specifically targeted the mind–body connection as well as larger concerns parenting students had regarding their own health and wellness and

their children's and the reality of living in a food desert coupled with pandemic inflation and increasing costs of healthy food options.

Academic Support

There is much variation in what classes are taken and how many credits are attempted (three credits to eight credits) and earned by the parenting student during the extended summer session/the HOPE Program. Although the suggested schedule was in-person morning classes, course availability and student needs necessitated flexibility in the modality and credit load they took on, stipulating that all parenting students in the program enroll in at least one summer course necessary for their degree progress. The structure of the HOPE Program encouraged HOPE Scholars to use unstructured time to study and to form study groups before and after class meeting times. Because they were encouraged to drop off their children early, many HOPE Scholars arrived as early as 8:00 or 8:30 a.m. for 9:30 a.m. classes, ate breakfast, and studied together. The HOPE Program principal investigator (PI) worked collaboratively with success coaches and different programs on registration and with the bursar to cover tuition gaps.

Academic support also focused on HOPE kids enrolled in our STEM Academy. During Year 2 (2023), initial placement testing showed most HOPE kids were two to three grade levels behind in mathematics, echoing research showing the disproportionate declines in mathematics among low-income Black and Hispanic children (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). The HOPE STEM Academy deployed an innovative curriculum, designed by an expert K–12 teacher, which included a series of hands-on STEM activities in which children were encouraged to build, create, program, and code. In Year 2, the STEM Academy instructors also performed diagnostic assessments in reading and mathematics and created student-specific goals for each student, and shared those goals and strategies to continue at home with each parent.

Professional Support

One of the key components of the HOPE Program is our lunch-and-learn model, which incorporated a healthy meal and a speaker or workshop. In addition to practical knowledge about on-campus services and networking opportunities with Hostos alumni, these lunch-and-learns provided space through which HOPE Scholars fostered relationships with knowledgeable people on campus as well as HOPE faculty and staff. We hypothesized that the lunch-and-learns would foster a sense of belonging to the college, to the HOPE Program, and to each other.

Due to the success of the lunch-and-learn model and the added fitness component in Year 2, we continued weekly fitness sessions and monthly lunch-and-learns after the summer programming concluded. In fall 2023, focal points for the lunch-and-learns were scholarships and budgeting. On average, 8 to 10 HOPE Scholars attended the lunch-and-learns and 2 to 4 HOPE Scholars attended the weekly fall fitness sessions.

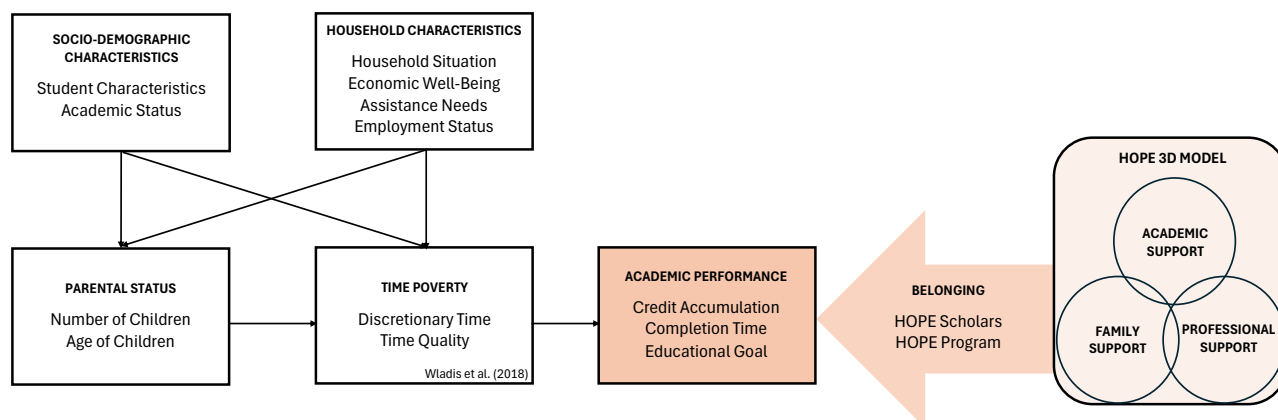
Methodology

To understand the effectiveness of the HOPE Program's 3D model, our research team utilized a mixed methods approach that included a series of focus group interviews and pre- and postsurveys for the participants in addition to a survey for non-HOPE parenting students, our quasi-control group. We call this our "quasi"-control group because there was no random assignment; our treatment group, the HOPE Scholars, applied to be in the program, whereas the quasi-control group was composed of parenting students who did not apply to be in the HOPE Program and volunteered to take our survey and receive a gift card. Several of the parenting students in the 2022 quasi-control group became HOPE Scholars in 2023, so it also served as a recruitment tool. Our conceptual diagram (see Figure 1) shows how the relationship among the sociodemographic characteristics, parental status, household status, and time poverty are related

to academic performance and how the HOPE Program's 3D Model can create belonging and potentially transform HOPE Scholars' academic performance.

Figure 1

The HOPE 3D Model



Our findings from our pilot surveys in Year 1 (2022) provided a complex picture of parenting students and presented several methodological challenges, which we addressed in Year 2 (2023) by shortening both the pre- and postsurveys, identifying and revising problematic questions, and working to improve the way we are administering the surveys. Our qualitative findings from Year 1 (see below) highlighted the need to examine belonging as an additional independent variable, so we added a series of validated questions that were extracted from a questionnaire called the Departmental Sense of Belonging and Involvement (DeSBI), developed and evaluated by Knekta et al. (2020) to measure university students' sense of belonging to and involvement in their biology department. Based on Strayhorn's model, Knekta et al. defined sense of belonging to a program as

[the] students' perceived social support at the department, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the department community or others in the community, such as faculty, staff, and peers. (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4)

The DeSBI theoretical framework supports a three-factor belonging structure: value and competence, social acceptance, and involvement. As a result, their questionnaire provides a multidimensional assessment of students' perceptions of belonging. It was adapted from an existing 18-item scale on psychological sense of school membership. Their final validated version had 20 items total, assessing three factors: (1) valued competence (5 items)—feeling competent, valued, and interested in by department faculty/staff; (2) social acceptance (6 items)—feeling accepted, respected, and supported by peers in department; and (3) involvement (9 items)—participating in research, interacting with faculty, attending events, and so on. All items were answered on a six-point Likert agreement scale. We selected the 11 items for valued competence and social acceptance and changed “biology department” in the original instrument to “HOPE Program” (see Table 1). We excluded the nine involvement items due to the short duration of our program (less than two months), but we are considering adding them to a survey for HOPE alumni to evaluate intermediate effects.

Table 1

The HOPE Program Sense of Belonging Items

No.	Item
<i>Sense of belonging: valued competence</i>	
S2	People in the HOPE Program notice when I am good at something.
S3	People in the HOPE Program value my opinions.
S6	People in the HOPE Program are interested in me.

- S16 People in the HOPE Program know I can do good work.
 S18 People in the HOPE Program give me compliments when I do something good.

Sense of belonging: social acceptance

- S10 HOPE Scholars (student parents) help each other to succeed.
 S12 In the HOPE Program, I am treated with as much respect as other students.
 S13 I have a good relationship with other HOPE Scholars.
 S14 I can really be myself in the HOPE Program.
 S19 I feel proud of belonging to the HOPE Program.
 S20 Other HOPE Scholars like me the way I am.
-

Note: Adapted from Table 5 (Knekta et al., 2020, p. 11).

The qualitative research's goals are to complement the quantitative research by allowing HOPE participants to richly describe their experiences in the HOPE Program. We also utilize the qualitative focus groups as real-time feedback that informs modifications to the program. The research followed the three-interview series method introduced by Schuman (1982) and explained by Seidman (1991). This involves conducting three separate interviews with the same participants in three different settings. HOPE Scholars were divided into several focus groups that consisted of three to seven participants. The first round of focus groups, conducted during the first and second week of the seven-and-a-half-week program, addressed their expectations, anticipated challenges, and initial impressions. The second round of focus groups occurred in the last week of the seven-and-a-half-week program and focused on experiences, challenges encountered, and final impressions. The third round of focus groups took place on Zoom three months after the completion of the summer programming and was devoted to retrospective impressions of the HOPE Program, a general check-in with HOPE Scholars including any lasting benefits and/or challenges, and suggestions for improvement. It should be noted that our only question that directly addressed belonging was a closed-ended question, "Do you feel part of the group/program?" The longer responses that we coded as belonging, then, were taken from other

questions about expectations, impressions, and more specific questions in the second and third focus groups about the HOPE 3D model of family, academic, and professional support.

These multiple meetings allow the researcher and participant to uncover segmented personal experiences and connect them to understand the whole impact of the project in context. The focus groups were semistructured and used open-ended questions concerning the subjects' educational backgrounds and experiences. They evolved rather freely, with the conversation following the stories shared by the subjects and sometimes going beyond the limits of the originally prescribed plan. As per our Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) approved protocol, we detailed our informed consent procedure before each focus group and then they were recorded and later transcribed. During the analysis of the collected materials, the episodes described by the subjects are juxtaposed, compared, and subsequently encoded and classified. Themes were independently extrapolated through a long manual coding process, and then these themes were compared to reduce single-coder bias. Following the principles of the grounded theory strategies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), systematic and inductive analysis were employed to remain open to the emergence of new concepts and ideas during the research process.

Preliminary Findings Year 1

In 2022, 14 parenting students enrolled and 11 of the 14 completed the seven-and-a-half-week HOPE Program. In 2023, 21 parenting students enrolled and 17 of them completed the HOPE Program. Of the original 11, two participated again in 2023. In 2022, 11 parenting students participated in the quasi-control focus group; 15 participated in 2023. General demographic descriptions of the HOPE Scholars and quasi-control groups are depicted in Table 2. HOPE Scholars tended to be significantly older (44.4% [2022] and 48% [2023] are ages 35–45) than the quasi-control group of parenting students (37% and 33% are ages 35–45). The

percentages of Black/African American HOPE Scholars (66.7% and 57%) and the quasi-control group (45% and 47%) are higher than the Hostos average (37.9%), whereas the percentages of Hispanic/Latinx HOPE Scholars (33.3% and 33%) and the quasi-control group (45% and 47%) were lower than the Hostos average (52.6%). Female HOPE Scholars (88.9% and 100%) and quasi-control group parenting students (91% and 87%) comprise the vast majority of respondents compared to the student population at Hostos (69%). Marital status also indicated interesting differences between parenting students in the HOPE Program (44.9% and 43%) and parenting students in the quasi-control group (0% and 33%).

Table 2**Demographics of Parenting Students in the HOPE Program and Quasi-Control Group**

	Year 1 (2022)		Year 2 (2023)	
	HOPE (<i>n</i> = 9)	QCG (<i>n</i> = 11)	HOPE (<i>n</i> = 21)	QCG (<i>n</i> = 15)
	%	%	%	%
Female	88.9	91.0	100.0	87.0
Hispanic/Latinx	33.3	45.0	33.0	47.0
Black/African American	66.7	45.0	57.0	40.0
Age (35–45)	44.4	37.0	48.0	33.0
Household Size (3–4)	66.0	73.0	62.0	87.0
Marital Status (Married)	44.9	0.0	43.0	33.0
Total Annual Income (less than \$12,760)	55.6	55.0	67.0	47.0

The focus groups in 2022 and 2023 provided richer outcomes than we expected. Together with the information gathered about how HOPE Scholars related with their peers and within the program, we observed an intrinsic value in their experiences. Our 2022 qualitative results

provided a rich tapestry of how HOPE Scholars described various ways of belonging and contrasted this sense of belonging as an adult learner, a parenting student, and a member of the HOPE Program to the loneliness they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 2022 HOPE Scholar said, “I’ve never been part of a group, so it’s nice to have that and have the support and know my kids are going to be taken care of while I’m in school. I can focus. I can study and it’s just a lot off my back [*laughs*]” (Week 1, 2022). Statements like, “We really feel we are part of the program,” “It’s like ‘this is where you’re supposed to be,’” and “Everybody’s a mom just like me so I feel comfortable” were all part of the first focus groups in Year 1 (Week 1, 2022). A 40-year-old mother of two described feeling “alone in classes” and “fending for oneself” as “not always a comfortable feeling, especially as an older student” and contrasted that to the HOPE Program when she stated, “You don’t feel isolated” (Week 1, 2022). A 28-year-old mother of two described her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic as follows: “I was all alone and it was really tough because I had no help. I had no support, so I had long, long days” (Week 1, 2022).

Many HOPE Scholars used the language of “having my back” to describe the ways in which they felt taken care of by and in the HOPE Program from the first week of programming, frequently naming the principal investigator/project director. One mom stated that it feels good “just to know that somebody’s going to have my back” (Week 1, 2022). She continued:

I feel like I can go to Dr. Hoiland for just about anything. . . . I feel like it’s like in a sense, family. Even in the first week, I could just come and say, “Hey Dr. Hoiland or Dr. Lee, this is going on.” “Oh, no problem, we’ll figure it out. Even if we don’t know, we’ll help you.” It helps. (Week 1, 2022)

Another mom stated something almost identical in a different focus group:

I feel even just in a week, supported. I feel like I can go to Dr. Hoiland for just about anything. We talked about th[is], and you feel support, you don't feel isolated, you [don't] feel alone. (Week 1, 2022)

A 28-year-old mom contrasted her college life before the HOPE Program again saying, "I am not alone [*chuckles*]. It felt like a community, we all had each other's back. We helped each other with anything. It was nice to have that" (Week 7, 2022).

Others noted a kind of awakening and renewed joy in being a student and sharing that excitement with their children. One mother noted that she was

really excited to start to think of me as a human being, not only as a mother but reconnected to things, . . . that it was always in my heart to come back to school. I'm really excited about the new path that I'm regaining. (Week 7, 2022)

One mom stated,

It felt like how I wanted to be in school when I was young. I wanted to be able to be talking more and socialize. I felt like a kid, but not a kid [in the HOPE Program]. Like I actually have a good school experience with my kid. . . . it was worth it. I definitely learned a lot. (Week 7, 2022)

A 28-year-old said,

My regular college life was pretty lonely [*chuckles*] and boring. I would just come to campus, to class, and go back home. Now I'm coming with my kids and they're excited. They love coming here with me and it's just really nice. (Week 7, 2022)

Another common set of comments we heard across focus groups in Year 1 were statements such as, "I feel seen, I feel heard. I feel like I'm part of something special. It's nice"

(Week 1, 2022). Another parenting student declared that she “felt heard” and described the HOPE PI, co-PIs, and staff in the following way,

They’ll ask you, “What you need, what do you think we should do better?”

They’ll always listen to you always try to meet everybody’s opinion desires which is great. You feel like you’re heard as a woman, as a mom, sometime you feel like. . . . Most of the time if you’re at home with the kids, you feel like you saying a lot of blah, blah and no one’s listening to you. For once, you have someone who listened to you, actually try to make those wishes come true. It really makes you feel great. (3 month, 2022)

This extended to how HOPE Scholars related and mattered to each other. A mother of three stated:

Then having those IEP³ talks and having other moms in similar situations also helped too because I was just by myself. I like that community of moms. It made me feel like to be a part of something. (3 month, 2022)

A 40-year-old mother of two said,

It’s like for me, it’s a community of parents coming together, not just for the kids, but also for themselves because it’s a teamwork effort. I think a lot of times the parents need support because we don’t know everything. (3 month, 2022)

³ Independent educational plans (IEPs) is shorthand for annual documents to chart a special education child’s educational goals and services.

One 33-year-old mom contrasted being “this old lady amongst all these teenagers” in her classes with being “in a community of moms like me, moms going through the same thing.” She continued,

It made college feel not so alone. Especially seeing you guys in the morning, saying “Good morning,” talking about our kids, you guys giving me advice, I give you guys advice, it felt good. It felt like a little clique, so I am going to miss that dearly. (3 month, 2022)

A 33-year-old mother of three said, “It feels great to walk into a room and be acknowledged and have conversations with other like-minded moms and dads. . . . Okay, good. I’m not alone. . . . I felt included” (Week 1, 2022). A 32-year-old mother of one described how much she liked the informal conversations saying,

That’s what I like—just to be able to get stuff off your chest and release because we’re parents, we’re moms and especially as moms, we don’t get that free time period. We don’t even get the chance to vent to a friend. Just to have that moment, that’s important. I definitely like that. Those moments with whoever I spoke to. (Week 7, 2022)

A 36-year-old mom described as

that woman aspect of it where we saw . . . seeing other women as a woman doing those things and telling us like they’re on the other side and just keep going. That encouragement, it was everything for me. (3 month, 2022)

HOPE Scholars expressed social acceptance within a group of peers. They experienced being accepted, respected, and valued by the community that HOPE was creating.

Year 2 Findings

In 2023 (Year 2), we were able to quantify something that we set out to create and easily captured in our Year 1 qualitative focus groups—belonging. The literature shows that a sense of belonging is associated with positive academic outcomes,⁴ and was central to our HOPE 3D model, but we wanted to measure if the variable “sense of belonging” has a relationship with other variables such as the students’ individual dimension (time poverty, sociodemographic characteristics) or their academic dimension (academic performance). In this post-HOPE survey, we added 11 items from the DeSBI and categorized belonging into two main areas—belonging to the HOPE Program and belonging to a peer group of HOPE Scholars (see Table 3)—and coded the qualitative responses using the same two categories.

Table 3

HOPE Scholars’ Sense of Belonging

	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
<i>Sense of belonging to the HOPE Program</i>					
People in the HOPE Program notice when I am good at something.	53	35	12		
People in the HOPE Program value my opinions.	76	24			
People in the HOPE Program are interested in me.	76	18	6		
People in the HOPE Program know I can do good work.	71	29			
People in the HOPE Program give me compliments when I do something well.	76	18	6		

⁴ “Previous research has shown that sense of belonging is positively associated with academic achievement, retention, and persistence (Pittman and Richmond, 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Morrow and Ackermann, 2012)” (Knekta et al., 2020, p. 10).

Sense of belonging to the HOPE Scholars peer group

HOPE Scholars (student parents) help each other to succeed.	76	24	
In the HOPE Program, I am treated with as much respect as other students.	82	18	
I have a good relationship with other HOPE Scholars.	82	18	
I can really be myself in the HOPE Program.	82	18	
I feel proud of belonging in the HOPE Program.	82	12	6
Other HOPE Scholars like me the way I am.	71	29	

Belonging to the HOPE Program

The 2023 quantitative results on belonging corroborate the initial qualitative findings from 2022 and 2023. Most of the students felt they were part of a community and positively valued being part of a group of students. Although there is an agreement in the students' general impression toward the program, the most highly rated items were how their opinions are being valued, how they are important to the program, and what these two represent when they do something good (76% of students strongly agreed). Students recognized that they are important to the program, what HOPE represents to them, but also what having someone involved with their responsibilities represented. HOPE Scholars repeatedly described a deep sense of their needs being met and having a point person. However, students were a little more restrained when they were asked if HOPE's staff noticed when they were good at something. If all the other questions in this category obtained a rate of response of 71% or greater strongly agreeing with the question asked, in this case 53% of students strongly agreed about the program noticing when they are good at something. The highest neutral position (12%) and lack of negative responses

could be indicative of the short-term nature of the program, the intensity of the summer courses, the timing of the survey (before the annual HOPE Celebration Ceremony), and/or the low participation rates of a few HOPE Scholars due to online class schedules and work commitments.

The 2023 focus groups shed some additional light on how HOPE Scholars see themselves as belonging to the HOPE Program. A 2023 participant stated:

To have a program like this that caters to your needs where you just get up and you come, you don't even have to think about breakfast. You don't have to think about transportation to come, is the fact. . . . For this program to develop it means that persons actually care about you and your well-being and want you to succeed. (Week 7, 2023)

As in 2022, belonging was attached to being cared for in many ways. Several students again highlighted the importance of HOPE staff following up and following through. A 2022 and 2023 HOPE Scholar elaborated, saying,

I can't even mention how many times Dr. H has stepped in to say, "Let me reach out on your behalf to this." It's not just saying, "All right, this is here also or they also provide." It's going further and really reaching out. Even beyond. (Week 7, 2023)

Belonging as a HOPE Scholar to a Peer Group

Of the six items on this scale of belonging to the peer group, 82% of HOPE Scholars selected strongly agree for four out of six items. These items were related to respect, relationships with peers, being oneself, and proud of belonging to the program. In response to "Other HOPE Scholars like me the way I am," 71% strongly agreed and 29% agreed. As in Year

1, much of the focus group conversation was about the “family” or “sisterhood” generated by the HOPE Program among parenting students and adult women in Year 2. As in the first year, it was a shock for many moms. One stated,

It was a challenge for me was just getting out of my own comfort zone because I’m pretty antisocial and very introverted. So just having the girls who are just like me and it’s so easier to talk to, and just interacting with you guys was the best part. (7 month, 2023)

When asked if they help each other to succeed, 76% strongly agreed and 24% agreed. Regardless of chronological age, parenting students viewed themselves as older and different from their nonparenting peers at Hostos. As adult learners and parents, many felt isolated from their peers prior to the HOPE Program. One 2023 HOPE Scholar liked being part of “wise mothers, older mothers” and continued by saying, “I run in the class with all 18-year-olds. Sometimes it’s a little distracting with the giggling. They learn different also.”

One Afro-Caribbean 2023 HOPE Scholar described her most memorable moment occurred while working out in the fitness center with other HOPE Scholars and the HOPE personal trainer, a student-father. She got really hot, and her wig started to bother her. Telling the focus group the story, she stated, “I took it [the wig] off and got comfortable [*laughs*]. That was the most memorable moment for me [*laughs*].” Another 2023 mom, an immigrant from West Africa, said, “Last week, we went to the pool. I have not swim [*sic*] before.” To her peers, she said, “Come and see my sisters. They teach me how to swim.” An informal back-and-forth ensued where the swim “coach,” another HOPE Scholar, an immigrant from Mexico, joked back and forth. The mom stated, “Was not easy for me. Now I know. Floating.” They all laughed. As

in most groups, some of the mothers in Year 2 were tightly knit together, while others did not experience the same sense of belonging.

Discussion

Developing a sense of belonging to a program and other peers typically takes time. One of the interesting initial findings of the HOPE Program is that many students began talking about belonging from Week 1, and the two memorable incidents described in Week 7 as the “most memorable” were deeply personal, particularly for Black women. Removing one’s wig and learning to swim in an Olympic-sized pool require big, bodily risks. In ways both literal and symbolic, they exposed themselves to their peers and they were not only supported, they were celebrated. They challenged themselves physically in the fitness center and in the pool and were quite literally coached by their peers. Both stories were shared with the PI, who is also a woman and a mother, and is indicative of trust and belonging. As we review our first two years of this five-year project, we can identify the focus groups themselves as sites of belonging. Carales and Nora (2020) include the development of a strong racial identity and the social experiences of students on campus as two primary constructs in their belonging model.

Summer sessions move at an incredibly rapid pace—a 15-week semester class is taught in half the time—and HOPE Scholars were also taking care of their children and many were working. A few students continued to work overnight shifts and come directly to school with their child or children. Because our program was in-person, HOPE Scholars who did not come every day and/or did not enroll their children were less connected to other HOPE Scholars and to the HOPE Program. Thus, some of our results, particularly the neutral responses, are not surprising. The references to the PI, Dr. Hoiland, or “Dr. H.” are included because they indicate the importance of a point of contact and are supported by literature on belonging that describes

the importance of faculty support in fostering belonging (Hoiland et al. 2020; Lucas & Roberts, 2022; Strayhorn, 2019). Studies support the importance of informal mentors, particularly among Latina STEM students, and research shows that when professors take on the role of informal mentors, they commonly impart both academic and professional knowledge (ContrerasAguirre & Banda, 2019). This is connected to what Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) called “mattering,” which can be obtained by positive attention, feeling cared about, feeling needed by others, feeling respected and appreciated, and experiencing oneself in others who share in our failures and successes. This type of interaction with relatively senior academic mentors is critical for college students when it occurs in “conditions that really matter in college” (Kuh et al., 2005). The HOPE Program created these conditions. This discovery came through our focus groups in Year 1, so we modified our survey and conceptual model to include specific indices of belonging.

Early results of the HOPE Program suggest some key findings that contribute to the knowledge base of parenting students and program interventions. Instead of being lost and alone, HOPE Scholars felt “heard,” “seen,” and part of a community. They turned to each other frequently and to the HOPE PI, co-PIs, and staff during and after the summer program ended. An early understanding of and empathy for parenting students’ financial responsibilities, family responsibilities, and lack of sufficient time for their college studies led to a carefully crafted in-person summer program with built-in flexibility that focused on the whole parenting student. By taking care of parenting students’ children, they felt that we took care of them, freeing them to focus on their classes.

After three-hour classes, HOPE Scholars were hungry, and they knew they would find healthy food and friendship every day in a dining area reserved for HOPE Scholars. Over shared

meals, informal conversations, and study groups, a sense of community and support flourished among them. They found solace in sharing their stories because they connected to their peers who were navigating similar joys and challenges. This understanding forged a deep connection, allowing them to empathize with the unique experiences of being parenting students and in most cases adult learners. In a regular class setting, many students said they felt different and were often recognized by their peers and faculty as being different. It was a very complex emotional experience for them. The HOPE Program provided physical and emotional space to connect as parenting students. Some of the bonding occurred first through the children and then later through HOPE Scholars. This naturally led to the development of relationships between families, which we can call “family mentorship.” The sense of connection and belonging was carefully facilitated through the HOPE Program schedule, which fostered formal and informal spaces for HOPE participants to connect without creating additional time-poverty constraints, and after the HOPE Program with a lunch-and-learn series and annual trips to the New York Botanical Garden Train Show every winter. Belonging has been linked to lower symptoms of psychological distress among Latina/x undergraduate students (Sims et al., 2020), and although our research does not delve into psychological distress directly, the loneliness and isolation described by so many HOPE Scholars sheds light on the lived experiences of parenting students immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic and broader patterns of mental health across the United States.

Challenges and Future Plans

In-person survey administration is one quantitative challenge we encounter with both the HOPE Scholars and the quasi-control group. For the HOPE Scholars, lunchtime made it feasible to have every participant complete the survey; however, due to varying student schedules and availability, participants were distracted by food, their peers/friends, and their phones. The quasi-

control groups took their surveys in a controlled computer lab setting, but we had low turnout rates after weeks of recruiting and offering gift cards. In Year 3 (2024), with the help of our program assistant (a HOPE Scholar alumna 2023 and 2024), we made great strides in securing good turnout in a campus computer lab; however, other issues that are related to trauma, the uses of surveys for people in poverty, and complex power and gender dynamics between researchers and participants became apparent. We are only beginning to explore this challenging dynamic. Almost all of our HOPE Scholars are what we are calling “social ‘welfare’ system-impacted,” so we will minimize risk by moving away from a computer laboratory setting (i.e., a conference room with laptops, for example) and having the PI (a woman and a mother) and program assistant (a woman, mother, and HOPE Scholar alumna) administer the surveys.

We need to reinforce the feedback loop between the quantitative and qualitative research teams. If we triangulate the quantitative results with the qualitative research, we could improve the understanding of any relation of causality in impact evaluations. An important methodological challenge is that the program’s impact depends on whether there could be a continuous monitoring of the student through institutional records to evaluate their academic progress throughout the five years of the program. The relative success of the HOPE Program will take several years to understand and continued close collaboration of the research team and external consultants. Additionally, we will continue to look at complementary cohort programs within CUNY that provide a range of services to students with specific characteristics as well as the national college and university programs that serve pregnant and parenting students.

On the qualitative side, we strove for rapport and distance, which was challenging, particularly for the PI who also serves as the onsite project director and is a daily presence in the on-campus programming. If students had serious critiques of the HOPE Program, they would

likely find it difficult to voice them to the PI/PD. On the other hand, HOPE Scholars also seemed to hold back on the aspect of belonging related to “mattering” and belonging to the HOPE Program. (All named references to the PI were from the co-PI’s focus groups.) Other aspects of belonging, particularly as women and as mothers, seemed to appear more in the PI’s focus groups because of her status as a woman and a mother and rapport with HOPE Scholars. The stories of wig removal and swimming are two examples. Co-PI Lee, a male and a father, had longer and larger focus groups and was not involved with any on-campus programming. We have discussed hiring a graduate research assistant to facilitate the focus groups, but we risk losing the familiarity HOPE Scholars have with the PI and co-PI and recognize that the pre- and postsurveys provide a way for HOPE Scholars to indicate dissatisfaction with the HOPE Program and/or areas of perceived weakness. Coupled with a reflexive approach, and an emphasis on the researchers’ positionality, we will maintain our current focus group protocol, making sure each participant has a different facilitator for each of the in-person focus groups and striving for the same or similar numbers of participants in each group.

We had lower participation in the seven-week and three-month focus groups. The seven-week focus group occurs at the end of the extended summer session, so HOPE Scholars are preparing for final exams. The three-month focus groups are on Zoom but proved to be even more challenging to schedule. Moving forward, we plan to incentivize all focus groups with gift cards and continue to offer several different days and times for the focus groups; currently we only incentivize control groups for the quasi-control group. We have also considered moving the three-month focus group in-person because nearly half of the cohort remained actively involved with fall lunch-and-learns in 2023.

Future plans include capturing the informal community that strengthens over time for HOPE Program Scholars that attend more than one year and for HOPE Program alumni after they graduate from Hostos Community College. We will build additional focus groups and/or interviews into our research protocol and consider using the DeSBI “involvement” items, which assess the likeliness of participating in “related-program” activities outside the actual program. For Year 3, we will add the Table 3 questions to the quasi-control group’s survey, inserting “the College” where the “HOPE Program” appears. We are eager to understand how our quasi-control group of parenting students compares to our control group of parenting students in terms of their sense of belonging. Little to no data exists institutionally in this area. Information regarding HOPE Scholars’ children who attended the HOPE STEM Academy (ages 5–11) was exclusively obtained from their parents. Although parents willingly shared valuable insights into the positive transformations they noticed in their children, our research methodology is designed to encompass a broader perspective. To achieve this, we plan to interview the teachers (one or two) in the final week of the program to strengthen our understanding of the HOPE Program’s effects on child participants.

Conclusion

HOPE Scholars received much more than food, childcare, tuition assistance, and MetroCards—our quantitative and qualitative research point out that parenting students read these supports as protective mechanisms that provided them with a strong sense of belonging to the program and to each other. They experienced our HOPE 3D model as a true oasis for parenting students, a solution for the isolation they experienced during the pandemic. By receiving all the support, many of them started to see themselves as individuals with their own dreams, desires, and needs. They formed lasting friendships and mentorships. As we begin our

third year of a five-year research project, we have a great deal of research and analysis ahead of us. We hope to ignite policy and budget discussions around holistically supporting pregnant and parenting students and their families at colleges and universities; however, the HOPE 3D model could be widely applied to other groups and to entire campuses by incorporating healthy, free food; childcare and summer kids' programming; and convenient workshop and mentoring opportunities.

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