

Summer Learning Program Quality *Assessment Case Study*

THIS BRIEF HIGHLIGHTS THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) and the Rutgers Future Scholars Summer program at Rutgers University campuses of Camden, Newark, and New Brunswick in New Jersey to assess its program quality and delivery of a high-quality summer program experience that will help the scholars served succeed in college, career, and life. This brief spotlights program-wide best practices and strengths. NSLA encourages organizations to use these practical examples as inspiration as they consider their own program quality.





University President Richard L. McCormick announced the inauguration of the Future Scholars Program in his Annual Address to the Rutgers University Community on September 28, 2007.

"Finally, and most significantly, I am proud to announce a bold initiative to expand the pipeline of talented students coming to Rutgers from underrepresented communities. Our student body is diverse, but too few young men and women—and especially too few young men—enroll at Rutgers from our state's large cities, including Rutgers' hometowns of Newark, Camden, Piscataway, and New Brunswick. We know that many students give up on learning as teenagers—or sooner—because they don't see college in their future. So we will establish the Rutgers Future Scholars program, a pilot project aimed at reaching minority and low-income students who might otherwise never consider college within their grasp..."

NSLA's Assessments and Program Quality Work

The National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) is the only national non-profit exclusively focused on closing the achievement gap by increasing access to high-quality summer learning opportunities. NSLA works with individuals and groups to use data to reflect the state of their program or system, develop, and implement a quality improvement plan and assess the results of their efforts against research-based indicators of quality. NSLA recognizes and disseminates what works, offers expertise and support for programs and communities, and advocates for summer learning as a solution for equity and excellence in education. For the past 20 years NSLA has worked with programs, foundations, networks, cities, and school districts across the country to offer tailored professional development opportunities, community landscape and program quality assessments, as well as technical assistance.

- **NSLA's assessments** gauge program quality in relation to research-based practices employed by high-quality summer programs using the Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment (SLPQA) tool, developed through a formal collaboration between NSLA and the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality to specifically measure the quality of summer learning programs against research-based standards.
- **NSLA provides** in-depth and collaborative program and site level formative assessments for organizations interested in collecting data as part of a continuous cycle of program quality improvement.

NSLA's assessment of the Rutgers Future Scholars summer program employed qualitative methods to collect information on the program's quality in the summer of 2016. Data sources included planning and site-specific documents, activity-level site observations, interviews with direct service staff, leadership, and stakeholders, and student surveys provided by leadership. After reviewing and analyzing the data, NSLA identified strengths and best practices where Rutgers Future Scholars summer program aligns with research-based indicators of quality. This brief highlights some of the program best practices, or "winning strategies," identified by NSLA.

Rutgers Future Scholars Program:

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY: Camden, Newark, New Brunswick/Piscataway and (as of 2016) Rahway*

The Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) program is a unique and progressive initiative designed to increase the number of promising low-income, first-generation-to-college New Jersey students who complete high school, apply to, and attend post-secondary educational institutions, including Rutgers University. RFS selects 215 potential “Scholars” in the 7th grade to become a part of this unique pre-college pipeline each year based on RFS’ principal of “promise” – or their (the “Scholars”) ability to invest in themselves for the betterment of their future, families, and communities.

Scholars engage in a five-year interdisciplinary and holistic college preparatory curriculum with the intent of fostering academic growth, social development, and personal enrichment. Through the program, Scholars receive ongoing university-taught academic preparation, exposure to campus and cultural events, attend in-school and after-school tutoring, and mentoring. RFS also offers Scholars academic advisement, which consists of high school transcript review, academic goal setting, and correspondence/meetings with school guidance counselors, college application and FAFSA assistance. In addition, the program offers Scholars an opportunity to explore relevant career paths through internships and exposure to industry professionals. After successfully

completing the program, Scholars that qualify and elect to attend Rutgers are awarded a four-year, tuition-free education.

Once Scholars are selected, they are required to participate in an academic and experiential summer program on their local Rutgers campus for three to six weeks. In some cases, these experiences also include a residential component. Scholars enroll in rigorous university credit-bearing enrichment courses taught by Rutgers faculty and can also participate in on-campus events. The courses are theme-based and designed in collaboration with the local school district and faculty and staff. While the coursework may vary on each campus based on accessible resources, consistent among all

campuses are the themes for each yearly program agenda.

- **Year One: Identity**, or cultivating an identity as a RFS and future college student
- **Year Two: Developing**, or cultivating the skills essential for mastery of core subjects in high-school and standardized tests
- **Year Three: Exploration** of career and college pathways
- **Year Four: Challenge**, or mastering skills essential for school success and educational expression
- **Year Five: Achievement**, or actualizing the goal of being admitted to college

Rutgers Future Scholars represents a unique opportunity and innovative direction for the future of college access and success for some of the nation’s most deserving students.





"I am because you are, the idea that together we form a community so there is a responsibility that we have to each other."

- Aramis Gutierrez
Director, Rutgers Future Scholars

WINNING STRATEGIES

Based on NSLA's findings from the summer 2016 assessment of the Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) program, the following practices exemplify high-quality summer learning in the field:

SAFETY ENVIRONMENT

Research suggests that physical and psychological safety needs form the base from which further growth and exploration can proceed. Physical and psychological safety is one of the features of positive youth development programs specified by the National Research Council.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Psychological and emotional safety is promoted by staff. RFS staff provide an emotionally safe environment in which youth feel safe to be themselves, take risks, share, get to know each other and learn. Youth are treated with mutual respect and there is inclusion of others despite differences. At the New Brunswick campus, Scholars were observed regularly volunteering ideas and answers, and frequently asked questions. In one session, staff asked Scholars if they had any ice-breaker ideas. An eager Scholar attempted to share with the class but was having difficulty explaining his ice-breaker.

The staff member patiently assisted the young Scholar until he was able to articulate his idea to the rest of the class. The Scholars were so engaged in the session, that when they were dismissed there was an audible sigh of disappointment. Research indicates that when the psychological and emotional needs of youth are met, they become more confident about their learning, strive to excel academically, attend the program regularly and are more likely to return the following summer.

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Research suggests that a warm, positive, and welcoming environment for youth is conducive to learning. Positive development programs for youth are situated in positive relationships between caring adults and youth participants.

WARM WELCOME

Staff provides a welcoming atmosphere. RFS staff greet Scholars warmly upon arrival. Smiles,

positive gestures and eye contact are consistently expressed towards Scholars. At the Camden campus, the program coordinator and other administrative staff were observed purposefully spending time interacting informally with Scholars. Greeting students, especially by name, does a lot towards establishing a productive environment and building relationships with young relations. RFS' welcoming environment helps young Scholars to feel comfortable to engage the program.

INTERACTION

Research shows that academic success is linked to youth feeling a sense of belonging in a learning community and believing that teachers or adults care about their well-being. A critical research review puts a sense of belonging as one of the mindsets that set the stage for improved learning outcomes by affecting academic perseverance, behaviors, and learning strategies.

BELONGING

Youth have opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. One of RFS core principals is that "Once a Scholar, Always a Scholar," which means that

"Find a way or make a way, exhaust all options for our Scholars."

- Nyeema Watson

*Camden Associate Chancellor
of Civic Engagement and
Camden RFS Coordinator*

the staff believes in an unconditional commitment to each Scholar. Once a Scholar is admitted into the program, the staff is committed to working with that Scholar despite their life challenges or circumstances. RFS also recruits Ambassadors who, in many cases, graduated from the program and/or are familiar with the program's targeted demographic. These Ambassadors often act as liaisons between the Scholars and the instructors and act as the Scholar's mentor in and out of the program. The staff and Ambassadors model what it means to be a part of a community. Among youth there is a strong need a sense of belonging. By facilitating deliberate strategies and structured activities geared toward belonging, youth workers give all youth opportunities to have this key experience.

ENGAGEMENT

Research indicates that in order for learning to be retained well and transfer to new settings it must be thoroughly practiced and integrated with existing knowledge schemas. Learning environments that are supportive, interactive, and engaging promote interest, challenge, and belonging which have been associated with higher levels of youth engagement.



HIGH ORDER THINKING

Youth are supported in reflecting and developing higher order thinking-skills. RFS staff encourages youth in using their creativity, curiosity, or imagination. For example, staff encourages youth to think "outside the box"; to use knowledge or skills in new ways, and encourages "wonder." At the *Newark campus*, during STEM

class, Scholars were introduced to a full lab report outline and rubric. They were then asked to test their hypothesis concerning angles and friction using hands on methods while applying math in multiple ways. Wondering, supposing, and being open to new ideas are important mental skill in all fields.





IN CONCLUSION...

RUTGERS
Future Scholars Program

Rutgers Future Scholars represents an innovative replicable model to inspire peer institutions to partner with school districts to identify, support, prepare, and offer tuition scholarships to promising low-income, first-generation middle school students. RFS' summer program exemplifies key areas of quality and researched-best practices supported by the National Summer Learning Association at the point of service essential to stemming summer loss and closing the achievement gap that prevents many students from acquiring the skills necessary for acceptance into college. For more information about RFS please contact:

RUTGERS
Future Scholars Program

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Does your organization need help implementing some of these best practices?

Interested in learning more about NSLA's evaluation process?

Do you want to evaluate your program — but don't know where to start or what tool to use?

www.summerlearning.org



Rutgers Future Scholars (RFS) can be described simply as a college access program. However, we believe it to be more. We think of it as a movement—a movement towards reimagining how educational institutions can serve their communities. We begin with a declaration; Once a Scholar, Always a Scholar. This is our promise to each young person and their families of our unconditional commitment to their success, in turn, our collective success. We offer hope and opportunity. Our nation has created far too many “zero tolerance” or “no excuses” responses to actions which can be interpreted as undesirable. We believe in supporting young people throughout these critical years during both the hardships and triumphs, and promise to serve as a surefire mainstay, always believing in their genius.