



Evaluation of Empowering Futures Gift Initiatives at Western Michigan University

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Overview

The Empowering Futures Gift (EFG) is a historic donation of \$550 million to Western Michigan University (WMU). \$200 million of the gift is funding specific initiatives at WMU, with the remainder going to WMU Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine (\$300 million) and Bronco Athletics (\$50 million).

The vision for EFG's \$200 million investment in WMU is to "close the student success gap by developing an integrated model of a thriving and diverse community," as defined by:

- **Sense of place and belonging** where students feel fully included and accepted, so they may pursue their education and full potential.
- **Sense of health and well-being** where students can meet their physical, emotional, mental, and financial needs so they are more likely to complete college.
- **Sense of learning and fulfillment** where students pursue or create a meaningful future that improves their communities and makes the world better. (From the *EFG Handbook*, an internal document at WMU)

As noted by President Montgomery in the *EFG Handbook*, EFG supports students to "get in and get on." This aspect of the gift relates to

- Increasing **access** through scholarships to reduce barriers to enrollment.
- Increasing **retention and graduation**, especially reducing disparities associated with racial/ethnic identities.

Following a brief overview of activities funded by EFG in the next section of this report, we provide an orientation to the evaluation's purpose and approach. The bulk of the report is dedicated to communicating findings from the evaluation, organized around the five topics of access, belonging, well-being, purpose, and retention and graduation. We close with several recommendations for future evaluation to fill information gaps through strategic and systematic data collection and studies to better understand EFG's impact and inform strategy.

The main purposes of this report are to (1) examine how EFG-funded activities are associated with and may contribute to desired outcomes and (2) set the stage for more robust evaluation in the future. This first EFG evaluation report is more descriptive than evaluative, since we do not yet have sufficient data for making conclusions about the quality or effectiveness of the various initiatives.

EFG-funded Activities

The 2023-24 academic year was the second year of most EFG-funded initiatives. To varying degrees, these activities are designed to increase access to WMU, strengthen a sense of belonging among students, promote their well-being, and deepen their learning sense of purpose. Collectively, they are intended to increase WMU's retention and graduation rates while closing equity gaps among demographic groups.

Table 1 provides an overview of the EFG-funded initiatives and their main intended outcomes. The table's associations of intended outcomes with initiatives are based on the evaluation workgroup members' judgements, not official EFG documentation. Although one could argue that every initiative supports every intended outcome, directly or indirectly, we are focusing on their overt purposes.

Table 1. Overview of EFG Initiatives and Main Intended Outcomes (gold highlighting indicates EFG focus areas)

Initiative	Access	Belonging	Well-Being	Purpose	Retention & Graduation
Bronco Connect is designed to support belonging and support career exploration, engagement, and study skills for recipients of the Bronco Connect housing scholarship.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Bronco Promise scholarship provides a tuition-free WMU education for up to five years for eligible first-year students. (EFG funds cover 29% of the program's budget.)	✓				✓
Broncos Lead helps students explore their career options through internships at nonprofits, small businesses, and start-ups that might not otherwise be able to offer a paid internship. Participation is need-based for employers but not for students. WMU reimburses participating employers the cost of interns' wages and taxes.				✓	
Health and Well-Being activities support student health, wellness, and belonging. EFG-funded endeavors include Common Ground, a space to support belonging and stress management; mental health peer education; on-demand teletherapy and crisis support; and two positions including the assistant director for mental well-being and WMU Essential Needs program manager.		✓	✓		
Navigator Network is designed to support the holistic development of students by increasing WMU's efficiency and responsiveness in anticipating and addressing students' needs. The initiative involves (1) individualized outreach to students based on their specific situations; (2) events to promote students' sense of belonging, health and wellness, and learning and sense of purpose; and (3) crisis management.		✓	✓	✓	✓
Student Success Hub is an online portal that can be utilized by all students and by academic advisors, Navigator Network staff, and special program staff. It provides staff with information about each undergraduate student's needs and progress in one location. It is intended to increase collaboration and simplify students' navigation of resources. (EFG funds cover about 15% of SSH's budget.)		✓	✓	✓	

Initiative	Access	Belonging	Well-Being	Purpose	Retention & Graduation
Tenacity Scholarships assist students in the third year or beyond with financial challenges that impact their ability to persist at WMU. The Tenacity Award (up to \$1,000) can be applied to tuition and fees.					✓

The Findings section of this report is organized around the five main intended outcomes. If an initiative has a checkmark associated with an outcome in Table 1, it is discussed in the corresponding section of the report.

Appendix A includes a logic model for the overall EFG initiative that illustrates how these activities support EFG’s overall aims, followed by separate logic models for each EFG activity.

Evaluation Background

The EFG executive team allocated funding to the evaluation effort in fall 2023, and the evaluation workgroup began meeting in January 2024. The EFG evaluation workgroup’s charge is to (1) Develop a meaningful and practical evaluation strategy; (2) Coordinate data collection and analysis; and (3) Facilitate the interpretation and use of evaluation findings.

Our efforts this year included creating logic models for each initiative, developing initiative-specific templates for streamlined reporting by the various initiative work groups, engaging the Evaluation Lab to collect original data, and assembling available information into this report. This year’s work has laid the foundation for increasingly focused and systematic ongoing evaluation. In the final section of this report, we offer recommendations for future evaluation efforts.

Evaluation Questions. The EFG evaluation focuses on five key questions, which are:

To what extent are EFG initiatives contributing to students’:

1. access to WMU?
2. sense of belonging?
3. health and well-being?
4. learning and sense of purpose?
5. retention and graduation at WMU?

The major sections of this report correspond to these evaluation questions.

Evaluation Data and Methods. Given that the evaluation started midway through this academic year, this year’s evaluation mostly utilizes existing information from various student surveys (i.e., Housing and Dining Survey, National College Health Assessment), the various initiatives’ annual reports, and from the Office of Institutional Research.

We engaged the Evaluation Lab, which is part of WMU's Evaluation Center staffed by students, to gather original data. The lab:

- conducted a brief in-person survey of 428 WMU students about their experience at WMU
- conducted focus groups with 29 Bronco Connect students and interviews with 26 of them
- conducted focus groups with 18 Broncos Lead interns

Given the disparities in WMU retention and graduation rates associated with race and ethnicity, we analyzed data based on these characteristics where possible. In relevant sections of this report, we note where the data indicate disparities.

Limitations. This first phase of the EFG evaluation has two important limitations:

- The evaluation started halfway through Year 2, so we are mostly relying on existing data, which is not always well aligned with the data needed for evaluation purposes.
- Other than retention and graduation data from the Office of Institutional Research (IR), we have minimal baseline data to assess changes over time.

Because of these limitations, we are highly cautious in making claims about the quality or impact of EFG-funded activities. However, in assembling data for this report, we have identified several opportunities to collect more robust data for EFG's ongoing evaluation, discussed in the final section of this report.

Findings

In the following sections, we present findings related to access, belonging, well-being, purpose, and graduation and retention. For each topic, we offer a brief overview, the current state of affairs at WMU, and each EFG initiative's main contributions in this area.

Access

WMU's mission statement describes the University as "an access-oriented institution that provides an impactful and inclusive education that integrates discovery and fosters holistic growth and well-being so *that all may learn*." However, cost can be a barrier to enrollment, limiting access to learning, especially for first-generation students and students from historically marginalized communities. Access relates to the "get in" part of President Montgomery's remark that EFG supports students to "get in and get on."

Access to WMU

WMU has an acceptance rate of about 85%, indicating it is accessible to a wide range of students. Twelve percent of WMU undergraduate students are first-generation, and 23% are Pell-eligible

EFG’s Contributions to Access to WMU

BRONCO CONNECT

The Bronco Connect Living-Learning Community scholarship offsets on-campus housing expenses for recipients by \$6,000 per year for their first two years at WMU. EFG’s priority populations of students who are first-generation, Pell-eligible, and from historically marginalized groups were well-represented among Bronco Connect scholarship recipients in 2023-24, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key demographic characteristics of Bronco Connect scholarship recipients compared with overall WMU undergraduate population

Demographic	Bronco Connect students (N=96)		WMU (N=12,414)
	n	%	%
Black or African American	17	18%	8%
Hispanic or Latino	21	22%	9%
First-generation	30	31%	12%
Pell-eligible	63	66%	23%

According to the Bronco Connect students who participated in focus groups and one-on-one interviews for the evaluation, financial support was one of the most significant impacts of their participation in Bronco Connect. One student explained, “Ultimately, if I hadn’t gotten a scholarship, I probably wouldn’t have come here because housing is expensive.” Another described it as a “game changer,” noting “it wasn’t the sole reason I came here, but it was a good motivator” (Youker et al., 2024).

BRONCO PROMISE

In 2023-24, 547 students (361 first-year and 186 second-year) received Bronco Promise scholarships, which covers their tuition for up to five years. First-generation, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino students were well-represented among Bronco Promise scholarship recipients, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Key demographic characteristics of Bronco Promise scholarship recipients compared with overall WMU undergraduate population

Demographic	Bronco Promise (N=547)		WMU (N=12,414)
	n	%	%
Black or African American	91	17%	8%
Hispanic or Latino	76	14%	9%
First-generation	199	36%	12%
Pell-eligible	542	99%	23%

Belonging

Belonging is a fundamental human need. Further, there is a substantial body of research that indicates a strong relationship between sense of belonging and academic success among college students. Students with a greater sense of belonging fare better than their peers with a lower sense of belonging in many areas, including motivation, perseverance, and academic performance. The research also indicates sense of belonging is fostered by feeling connected with other students and college personnel and engagement with friends, student organizations, and extracurricular activities. (Kelly et al., 2024)

Sense of Belonging at WMU

WMU students' sense of belonging is on par with national averages. In the 2023 National College Health Assessment (HCHA), 65% of WMU respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement, "I feel I belong at my college/university," compared with 64% of students nationwide (NCHA, 2023a, 2023b).

On the 2022 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 66% of WMU freshmen and 56% of seniors, respectively, said the University "very much" or "quite a bit" emphasized "Providing opportunities to be involved socially." For freshmen, these ratings are eight percentage points higher than the average for WMU's Carnegie peer institutions. However, for seniors, these ratings are four percentage points lower than at peer institutions. (NSSE, 2022)

The data points reported above are consistent with findings from WMU's Housing and Dining Survey. In 2023, 64% of that survey's respondents said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement, "I feel at home/comfortable on my floor/house/apartment."

The EFG-funded survey of 428 WMU students conducted by the WMU Evaluation Lab in spring 2024 produced similar results (Wingate et al., 2024). Students were asked to **rate their sense of belonging** at WMU on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is "awesome." The average rating for all 428 respondents was 8.1 ($SD = 1.75$). Most respondents (71%; $n=305$) gave a rating of 8, 9, or 10. Nine percent of students ($n=39$) rated their sense of belonging at a 5 or lower. Differences across racial/ethnic groups were relatively small (mean ratings across groups ranged from 7.64 to 8.27) and not statistically significant. Since this was the first time this survey was conducted, we don't have a benchmark or baseline against which to interpret these ratings.

The in-person survey also asked respondents **whom they would reach out to** if they were experiencing a serious challenge at WMU. The purpose of this question was to determine if students felt that there was someone at the University they could rely on for help if needed. Most of the respondents (72%; $n=295$) identified a WMU employee, primarily advisors (28%) and professors (22%).

Notably, more than one-third of respondents (38%; $n=157$) identified a WMU professional by name. They mentioned 104 WMU faculty and staff members, with 38 individuals named by more than one respondent.

EFG's Contributions to Belonging at WMU

All of the EFG-funded initiatives may benefit students' sense of belonging directly or indirectly by connecting them with resources and support and heightening their engagement on campus. Bronco Connect, Navigator Network, and Student Success Hub have the most obvious linkages to belonging, so they are highlighted in this section.

BRONCO CONNECT

In 2023-24, Bronco Connect awarded housing scholarships to 96 students. Bronco Connect scholarship recipients live in a living learning community on campus; attend events designed, in part, to help students connect with each other; and are encouraged to join student organizations and participate in campus events.

Feeling connected was one of the most significant impacts identified by Bronco Connect participants when asked about the program's impact during focus groups and interviews conducted by the Evaluation Lab. Additionally, the ideas of community, friendships, and support—all markers of a sense of belonging—came up repeatedly regardless of the specific question topic. Bronco Connect participants also noted that the program supported them in making the emotional transition to college—"just getting over the fear of being here," as one student explained.

Being part of a diverse community is another clear benefit of Bronco Connect. Bronco Connect students who participated in focus groups and interviews affirmed the value of the community's diversity.

The WMU Housing and Dining Surveys asks respondents to indicate the extent they agree or disagree with the statement, "I feel my identities are supported by other students on my floor." The Evaluation Lab's qualitative data collection with Bronco Connect students was an opportunity to gain insights into what this question means to students. When asked how Bronco Connect recognizes their identities, focus group participants expressed appreciation for seeing students like them. For example, one student explained how she was pleasantly surprised: "I was like, 'oh, PWI [predominantly White institution] time, who's ready to have zero Black friends?' And then I got here, and then I wound up meeting the people in Bronco Connect, and it helped me feel more comforted and a little more at home." Another student who identifies as queer said they appreciated how the community was inclusive of queer and gender-non-conforming students.

Support from learning community assistants also seems to be an important factor in creating a sense of belonging among Bronco Connect participants. When asked about the role of the assistants during focus groups and interviews, students said the assistants took time to get to know them as individuals and provided valuable guidance for navigating life on campus. One student commented "If you have

anything you're concerned about with school or personal life ... they'll work you through it." Another noted, "They make you feel like family."

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Given the close relationship between sense of well-being and belonging, it is quite likely that EFG-funded Health and Well-Being initiatives are also affecting students' sense of belonging at WMU. We have consolidated information about the Health and Well-Being initiative in the Well-Being section of this report, since that is the workgroup's distinct charge.

NAVIGATOR NETWORK

The Navigator Network is designed to anticipate and respond to students' individual needs. Navigator Network staff prioritize engaging with students who are first generation, Pell-eligible, or from historically marginalized groups (i.e., Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or American Indian, and multiracial). Members of these groups are more likely to encounter challenges to their sense of belonging given their underrepresentation in higher education. In addition to supporting students' specific needs, Navigation Network staff may positively impact sense of belonging on campus by helping students to connect and engage on campus.

One way the Navigator Network works specifically to support students' sense of belonging is through events designed to promote cultural belonging. In 2023-24, 24 of these events were attended by 2,416 students.

STUDENT SUCCESS HUB

In 2023-24, 268 alerts related to belonging and engagement concerns were created in Student Success Hub. Each alert was generated because of an instructor's submission of Academic and Holistic Well-being Form or a student's responses on the Thriving Survey. For example, an alert is generated if a student indicates that they don't feel like they belong or they aren't satisfied with their social engagement in response to Thriving Survey questions on these topics. Navigator Network staff members respond to the alerts.

Well-Being

Well-being is a multifaceted concept that involves overall physical and mental wellness, happiness, satisfaction, and thriving. Belonging, addressed separately by EFG and in this report, is also essential for well-being (Amey & David, 2020). A person's health and well-being are not static; students' needs vary over the course of their academic careers. Thus, an important part of supporting students' well-being is to educate them about available resources, so they are equipped and empowered to manage their own well-being, accessing support when needed.

Health and Well-Being at WMU

Only 43% of WMU students described their health as “very good” or “excellent” when they responded to the 2023 NCHA survey. That was lower than both the 2023 national percentage of 50% and the 56% of WMU students who described themselves that way in 2021. The NCHA survey also asked respondents to indicate if any ongoing or chronic conditions negatively impacted their academic performance. The biggest health-related impediments among WMU students were anxiety (reported by 34% of respondents), depression (24%), and sleep difficulties (22%). (ACHA, 2023a, 2023b)

On the 2022 National Survey of Student Engagement, 62% of WMU freshmen and 49% of seniors, respectively, said the University “very much” or “quite a bit” emphasized “providing support for your overall well-being.” (For freshmen, these ratings are five percentage points higher at WMU than at our Carnegie peer institutions. For seniors, these ratings are eight percentage points lower than at peer institutions. (NSSE, 2022)

As part of the EFG-funded survey of 428 WMU students, respondents were asked how well WMU was doing in terms of supporting their health and wellness on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 represented “awesome”). The mean rating among all respondents was 7.42 ($SD=1.85$). The mean ratings given by students identifying as Black or African American, Asian, White, and Hispanic or Latino ranged from 7.02 to 8.15, with Hispanic or Latino students giving the most favorable of WMU’s support of student health and wellness. However, the differences across groups are not statistically significant. Just over half of respondents (55%; $n=234$) gave a rating of 8, 9, or 10. Sixteen percent ($n=68$) gave a rating of 5 or lower in response to this question. While we lack a clear benchmark or baseline for interpreting these results, it seems the University has room for improvement.

BRONCO CONNECT

In addition to providing financial benefits and enhancing belonging, Bronco Connect works to make participants aware of the wide array of resources that are available at WMU to support their well-being.

In 2023-24, 81% of the 96 Bronco Connect participants met the requirement of attending seven or more program events per semester. Participation in these events is important, since they are intended to promote a sense of belonging as well as help them develop skills and connect with resources to support their well-being. For second year students ($N=19$), fewer than half (42%) met this requirement in the spring, compared with 90% in the fall.

Findings from the focus groups and interviews with Bronco Connect participants indicated that these events raised students’ awareness of resources available to them on campus. One student explained that they appreciated, “learning about different parts of the school and what it has to offer and all the opportunities we have and can take advantage of” (Youker et al., 2024, p. 10).

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Health and Well-Being initiative is EFG's major investment in supporting WMU students' physical, behavioral, and emotional health. The activities supported by this initiative are designed to enhance students' resilience and ensure they are equipped to navigate challenges to their health and well-being.

The Assistant Director of Mental Well-Being position is a focal point for student mental health. The person in this position educates students, staff, and faculty about mental wellness, focusing on health equity, suicide prevention, and community care. In 2023-24, the assistant director held 55 training events, engaging 2,750 attendees.

Common Ground is an initiative that grew organically out of the work of mental health peer educators. They saw a need for a space where students could be their authentic selves as well as connect with peer educators. Common Ground was established in 2022 and was added to the portfolio of EFG-funded activities the following year in recognition of the important role it played for the students who used it. In 2023-24, Common Ground served 413 students, more than doubling the number of students who visited the space the year before. Common Ground seems to address a need, especially for students who identify as Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino. Students with these identities made up 32% and 18% of Common Ground users, although they comprise only 7% and 9% of the WMU student population, respectively.

Essential Needs helps students meet their basic needs, including food, personal care items, safer sex supplies, period products, and emergency financial assistance. EFG funds a full-time program manager who oversees the distribution of these resources, attending to equity and efficiency. (Products and financial assistance funds are obtained from non-EFG sources, such as individual donations and grants.) Prior to the EFG investment in 2022, the Essential Needs program had no professional/permanent staffing and was supported only by a graduate assistant. During the 2023-24 academic year, Essential Needs served 982 students, distributing an average of 712 bags of food per month. The program managed the distribution of more than 29,000 period products, 600 safer sex supplies, and \$37,223 in emergency relief funds; it also supported two students in buying textbooks. In addition, the program manager secured more than \$40,000 in grants and cash donations in 2023-24.

Let's Talk is an awareness-raising endeavor to ensure students know about WMU's mental health support and services. In 2023-24, Let's Talk had 322 points of contact with students at 49 outreach events at 12 locations across campus.

Mental Health Peer Educators are trained to teach other students about mental well-being, including suicide prevention, coping skills, and available resources to support their mental health. Peer educators participate in tabling events, give presentations, and work with departments and RSOs.

UWill is a source of on-demand therapy that is free to all WMU students. The service offers up to five 30-minute sessions; if students need more support, WMU staff

help them transition to other providers (according to the UWill page on WMU's website). A total of 211 students used the service between August 2023 and April 2024.

NAVIGATOR NETWORK

The Navigator Network also addresses students' holistic well-being. Navigator staff support students with a wide range of issues that may affect their well-being at WMU. In addition to proactive outreach, Navigator Network staff respond to alerts created because of Academic and Holistic Well-being forms submitted by instructors, students' responses to the Thriving Survey, and a wide array of conditions related to grades, attendance, and enrollment. All of these factors may reflect potential threats to well-being or reduced well-being. Navigator Network staff close a total of nearly 27,000 alerts about students in 2023-24.

Two findings from the survey of 428 undergraduate students in April 2024 provide preliminary evidence that the Navigation Network is working as intended:

- **Most respondents (72%; $n=307$) had been contacted by someone at WMU to ask about their personal or academic well-being.** Most of these respondents (60%; $n=183$) said they felt positive about the outreach, with only nine respondents (3%) reporting negative feelings about it (the remainder were neutral). We recognize that outreach to students has other forms and causes not related to EFG or the Navigator Network. However, these findings suggest that outreach efforts by Navigator Network and other caring members of WMU's professional staff are apparent to students and received positively.
- **None of the respondents to the campuswide survey suggested that WMU needed to improve its handling of students' questions and concerns,** when asked what WMU could do to better support their success. Navigator Network staff use the Student Success Hub to manage responses to student needs, which is intended to make WMU more efficient and compassionate—and eliminate the problem of students being handed off between offices without their problems being resolved.

STUDENT SUCCESS HUB

In 2023-24, 918 alerts were created in Student Success Hub due to instructors' submission of Academic and Holistic Well-being Forms related to physical or mental health concerns or students' responses on the Thriving Survey. For example, alerts are created if a student's answers to Thriving Survey questions indicate they are experiencing challenges with their mental or physical health. Navigator Network staff members manage the alerts created in the Student Success Hub.

Learning and Sense of Purpose

Students come to WMU to learn and prepare for their future careers – essential steps for creating their “meaningful futures,” as envisioned by EFG. Learning and developing a sense of purpose happens both inside and outside of classrooms.

Learning and Sense of Purpose at WMU

On the 2022 National Survey of Student Engagement, 71% of WMU freshmen and 61% of seniors, respectively, said the University “very much” or “quite a bit” emphasized “providing support to help students succeed academically.” (For freshmen, these ratings are a few percentage points higher than at WMU’s Carnegie peer institutions. For seniors, these ratings are a few percentage points lower than at peer institutions. (NSSE, 2022).

In WMU’s Career Outcomes survey of 2022-23 graduates, 84% of respondents who received undergraduate degrees “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “their education and experience as a student at WMU prepared them for their profession.” Sixty-five percent said they had an internship or field experience while at WMU. (Urban et al., 2024, 2024b)

In the spring 2024 survey of 428 WMU students conducted by the Evaluation Lab, respondents were asked how well WMU was doing in terms of supporting their educational and career goals on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 represented “awesome”). The mean rating for all 404 respondents was 7.9 ($SD = 1.48$). More than two-thirds of respondents (68%; $n=274$) gave a rating of 8, 9, or 10, while just 5% ($n=21$) of respondents gave a rating of 5 or lower. The mean ratings of students identifying with different racial/ethnic groups ranged from 7.16 to 8.79, with students identifying as Hispanic or Latino giving the most favorable ratings of WMU’s support of their educational and career goals and those identifying as Asian giving the least favorable ratings. These differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$), suggesting that Hispanic or Latino students feel more positive and Asian students feel less positive about their academic experience compared with the general population of WMU undergraduates. While there is no benchmark against which to judge these results, the overall ratings seem to reflect fairly well on the University, with room for improvement especially in terms of ensuring all students feel supported.

On the same survey of 428 students, respondents were asked whom they would reach out to if they were experiencing a serious challenge at WMU. Notably, the most common responses were their academic advisors (28%) and professors (21%), which we interpret as a positive indicator of how students feel about the academic professionals they engage with at WMU.

EFG’s Contributions to Learning and Sense of Purpose at WMU

While all EFG initiatives are ultimately intended to support students’ academic success, whether directly or indirectly, four initiatives have heightened relevance for EFG’s priority of learning and sense of purpose: Bronco Connect, Broncos Lead, Navigator Network, and Student Success Hub.

BRONCO CONNECT

The 2023-24 academic year was the second year for the first cohort of Bronco Connect students who started in 2022. In this first round of programming for second-year students, events included an additional focus on career-readiness. Eight

of the weekly Bronco Connect events covered career-related topics such as Clifton Strengths, résumés, internships, interviewing, and career fairs.

In focus groups and interviews, some second-year Bronco Connect students mentioned receiving guidance on internships and interviewing. However, career preparation does not appear to be a notable impact of Bronco Connect based on the qualitative data. (A limitation is that only eight of the 29 participants in these data collection efforts were second-year students.) (Youker et al., 2024a)

BRNCOS LEAD

Broncos Lead internships are intended to help students clarify their sense of purpose by creating opportunities for them to gain meaningful work experience while earning competitive wages and, ideally, make connections between classroom learning and real-world applications.

In 2023-24, Broncos Lead placed 136 students in internships in varied locations such as the Black Arts Cultural Center, Grayling Ceramics, Tillers International, and YMCA of Kalamazoo (among about 25 businesses and nonprofits). Interns represented all eight of WMU's main colleges, including majors for which internships are less common (e.g., African American and African Studies, criminal justice, history psychology, theater).

The results from focus groups with 18 Broncos Lead participants in the spring 2024 semester suggest that the program is achieving its intended results and more (Youker et al., 2024b):

Focus group participants conveyed that the Broncos Lead internships had a major impact in terms of their **preparedness for their future careers**. Specifically, they reported they were more

- confident in their professional abilities
- certain about what they wanted to do in their future careers
- adept with soft skills (e.g., communication and teamwork) and job-specific technical skills (e.g., PowerPoint, product photography)
- aware of options within their chosen career paths

Focus group participants highlighted the **interpersonal and financial supports** they experienced in their Broncos Lead internships:

- It was important that the internships were paid.
- Interns appreciated opportunities to expand their professional networks.
- Their supervisors were valued mentors.

Broncos Lead participants also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to gain **practical experience**. They shared that these experiences

- were meaningful
- provided hands-on learning
- engaged them with real-world issues

NAVIGATOR NETWORK

Navigator Network staff connect students to resources they need to be academically successful. Navigators proactively reach out to students from groups with lower rates of retention and graduation at WMU. Navigator Network staff closed 7,852 alerts for students from historically underrepresented groups; 9,370 alerts for Pell-eligible students; and 5,122 alerts for first-generation students.

STUDENT SUCCESS HUB

Although we don't have data to demonstrate cause-and-effect, Student Success Hub usage data indicates the system is being used as intended to help students keep on track academically. Sixty-five percent of students used the Success Hub to schedule appointments (e.g., with advisors or Navigators) in 2023-24 (as of April). All forty-three academic advisors at WMU used SSH to manage advising appointments with students.

In 2023-24, more than 41,000 alerts were created in SSH due to a wide range academic-related issues, from lack of attendance to low grades to students' reporting dissatisfaction with their academic progress via the Thriving survey. Members of the Navigator Network managed these alerts.

Retention & Graduation

It is well established that educational attainment is associated with higher earnings and better health. A recent study by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation found that “people with greater education tend to have better health, are more engaged citizens and contribute more to their local communities” and are more likely to interact with and trust their neighbors (Gallup, 2023, p. 28).

Retention is a measure of an institution's success in retaining students from year-to-year, with the retention from the first to second year being especially critical. Persistence, in contrast, is about the student's continuation towards a degree, regardless of the institution where that occurs (Amey & David, 2020). While persistence is important for an individual's positive outcomes, retention at WMU is critical for the institution's health. Retention, naturally, is a precursor to graduation.

Retention and Graduation at WMU

In fall 2023, President Montgomery set the goal for WMU to raise to third in the state for student success. He laid out specific targets to achieve by 2028, as follows:

- Increase first-to-second year retention rate from 79.8% (2023) to 84%
- Increase overall 6-year graduation rate from 57.8% (2023) to 62%
- Increase graduation rate for Black and African American students by 8 percentage points above rate for 2017 cohort (i.e., to 52.1%)
- Increase graduation rate for Hispanic students by 4 percentage points above rate for 2017 cohort (i.e., to 52.7%)

Figure 1 shows first-to-second year retention rates for incoming cohorts of first-time, full-time students for the past seven years. In addition to overall retention rates, the chart shows rates for Black or African American and Latino or Hispanic students, since those groups are highlighted in the President's goals.

Figure 1. First-to-Second Year Retention Rates by Cohort

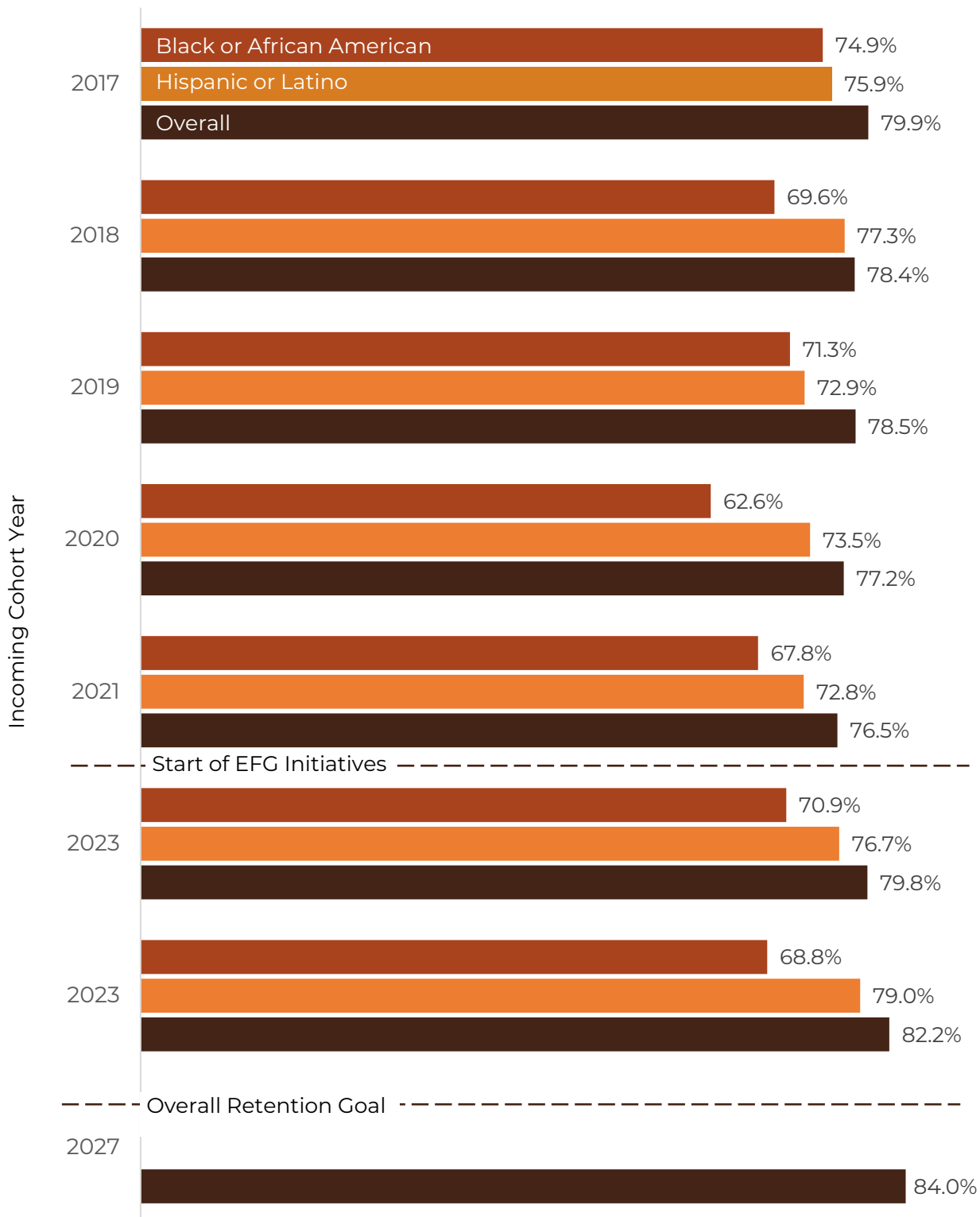
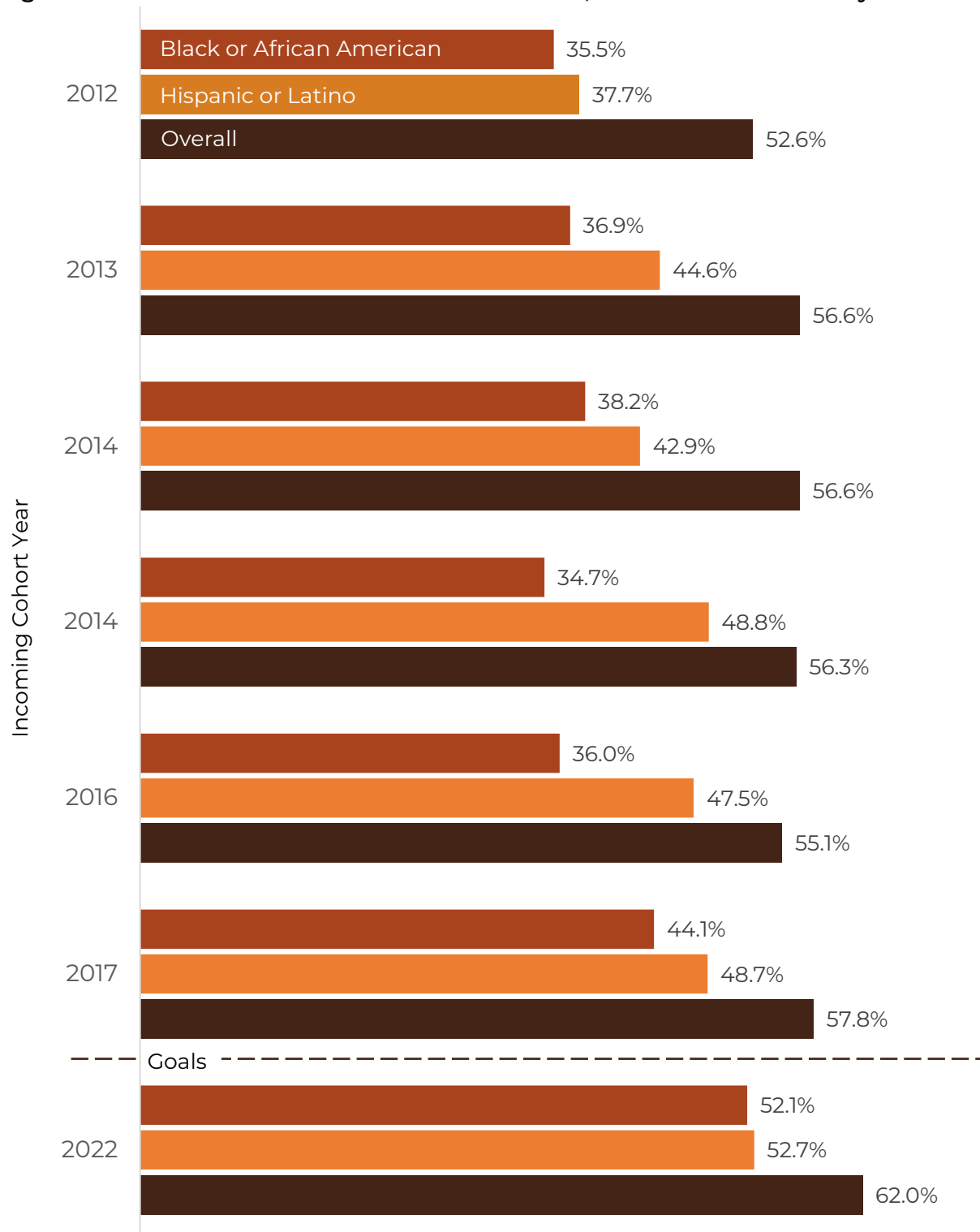


Figure 2 shows graduation rates for cohorts of first-time, full-time students for the past seven years. In addition to overall graduation rates, the chart shows rates for Black or African American and Latino or Hispanic students.

Figure 2. Six-Year Graduation Rates for Full-Time, First-Time Students by Cohort



As shown in these graphs, overall retention and graduation rates are trending upward. There is an especially notable improvement in the six-year graduation rates for Black or African American students, which increased to 44.1% for the 2017 cohort, after fluctuating between 35% and 37% for cohorts entering between 2012 and 2016.

EFG’s Contributions to Retention

Ultimately, all EFG initiatives are expected to improve students’ ability and desire to remain at and graduate from WMU, while increasing equity across demographic groups.

When feasible and appropriate, EFG initiative workgroups reported retention rates for the students they impacted. Specifically, they reported the percentage of students served who had either graduated or enrolled for the 2024 fall semester, as of the end of the 2024 spring semester. Table 5 indicates the rates each initiative reported, as well as for all Pell-Eligible, first-generation, and the total undergraduate population.

NOTE: These data points are included in one table to consolidate the metrics. The rates for the various initiatives should not be compared since they focus on different populations and types of students.

Table 5. Point-in-Time WMU Combined Retention and Graduate Rates for Select Student Groups and Overall (i.e., percentage of students who had graduated from WMU or enrolled at WMU for the fall 2024 semester as of the end of the spring 2024 semester)

Initiative	Number of Students Involved	Combined Retention and Graduation Rate
Bronco Connect (first- and second-year students)	140	79%
Bronco Promise (first-year students only)	361	69%
Broncos Lead (2022-23 and 2023-24 interns)	135	87%
Tenacity Scholarship (2022-23 and 2023-24 recipients)	1,343	66%
All Pell-Eligible students	4,281	71%
All first-generation students	2,088	68%
WMU OVERALL	12,746	76%

EFG initiatives with an immediate relationship to retention include the Navigator Network, Student Success Hub, and the Tenacity Scholarship. Other initiatives contribute to retention more indirectly.

NAVIGATOR NETWORK & STUDENT SUCCESS HUB

Navigator Network and Student Success Hub work in tandem to address retention. The Success Hub auto-generates alerts related to academic dismissal, academic probation, lack of advising appointments, lack of enrollment in the next semester,

and course withdrawal. All these situations pose an immediate threat to a student staying at or returning. In 2023-24, Navigator Network staff managed 18,373 alerts in these categories.

TENACITY SCHOLARSHIP

Students in their third year or beyond are eligible for Tenacity scholarships up to \$1,000 to pay outstanding tuition and fee balances. These awards are expected to help students remain at WMU despite financial strain.

In 2023-24, 625 students received Tenacity scholarships. More than half of recipients (55%) were Pell-eligible, 28% were first-generation students, and 38% of identified as members of historically underrepresented populations.

Conclusions

We address each evaluation question below. It is too early in the implementation of EFG-funded initiatives and the evaluation process to offer definitive answers to the evaluation questions. Rather, answering the evaluation questions will be a continuing endeavor as the evidence base builds over time. Each year of the evaluation, we will increase the quantity and quality of data available to clearly answer these questions and offer data-informed recommendations for strengthening efforts to realize EFG's vision.

To what extent are EFG initiatives contributing to ACCESS to WMU?

EFG's contribution to the Bronco Connect and Bronco Promise scholarship programs helps expand access to WMU by reducing costs for eligible students.

EFG funds have augmented WMU's efforts to increase access through scholarships. EFG covers 29% of Bronco Promise costs and 89% of Bronco Connect. Together, 643 students directly benefited from these investments. Bronco Connect participants said the financial support had a significant impact on them and cited it as an important factor in their decision to attend WMU and live on campus. We do not have data on the Bronco Promise's impact on attracting students to WMU.

Although not a focus of EFG or the evaluation, it is noteworthy that these scholarships presumably also reduce students' debt burden when they are finished with school. WMU's Office of Institutional Research is examining the degree to which Bronco Promise has impacted (a) the total cost-of-attendance covered by financial aid and (b) the amount of loan aid among the scholarship recipients.

To what extent are EFG initiatives contributing to students' sense of BELONGING?

Several EFG-funded activities have an obvious theoretical and logical link to strengthening students' sense of belonging at WMU. We have limited data about outcomes of the various EFG initiatives designed to support students' sense of belonging, with the exception of Bronco Connect.

Students who participated in focus groups and interviews about Bronco Connect clearly conveyed that the program positively impacted their sense of belonging and eased their transition to college. In addition, the students appreciate being part of a diverse community and sharing identities with both peers and student leaders.

To what extent are EFG initiatives contributing to students' HEALTH AND WELL-BEING?

EFG supports various activities to elevate attention to health and well-being at WMU and equip students with strategies and resources to help them manage their wellness. The range of activities and resources are designed to meet a wide variety of needs – whether students are looking to strengthen their quality of life or need help in a crisis situation.

We don't have outcome data about health and wellness activities. However, from an implementation perspective, it is clear that increased funding and staffing have enabled the growth and institutionalization of services such as mental health peer education, WMU Essential Needs, and training and awareness about mental health.

To what extent are EFG initiatives contributing to students' learning and sense of PURPOSE?

The EFG initiatives included in this evaluation are not designed to influence classroom learning directly. WMU leveraged EFG funds, along with contributions from multiple WMU vice presidential areas, to award experience-driven learning grants to faculty to either create or grow experience-driven learning associated with courses. That work is managed separately from the seven EFG initiatives addressed in the evaluation.

The focus groups with Broncos Lead participants revealed that the program is achieving results consistent with expectations for strengthening students' sense of purpose. Broncos Lead interns reported that their internships made them feel more confident about their future careers and more certain about what they wanted to do. They expanded their professional networks, gained hands-on experience, and learned both soft and job-specific skills.

To what extent are EFG initiatives contributing to RETENTION and GRADUATION?

It is too early to claim a causal relationship between EFG initiatives and WMU's improving retention and graduation rates. Many EFG initiatives prioritize populations that historically have had lower retention and graduate rates. Therefore, if the initiatives' theories of change come to fruition, the EFG-funded work should positively impact graduate rates and reduce equity gaps.

Recommendations for Future Evaluation

Increasing retention and graduation rates and closing equity gaps are the ultimate aims of EFG. To make inroads in these areas, EFG is investing in initiatives designed to enhance students' sense of belonging, health and well-being, and learning and sense of purpose. We recommend focused studies to assess the impact of various initiatives to better understand how they are impacting students and contributing to retention and graduation at WMU.

The WMU Experience

We recommend conducting the **campus-wide student survey** annually now that we have baseline data. While keeping the survey short, we can add a few targeted questions to learn more about the student experience at WMU and/or related to specific EFG initiatives. This mode of data collection could be especially useful for assessing the effects of the Navigator Network and Health and Well-being since those initiatives are less bounded than other EFG initiatives (i.e., there is no way to clearly define who is and is not a "participant" since all students can use these services). It is also an opportunity to gain insights regarding unmet student needs.

The Division of Student Affairs' internal assessment team is conducting a **cohort study of 50 first-year students** this academic year. The purpose of this study is to explore the first-year student experience at WMU, including student's difficulties and achievements, the resources they do or do not utilize, who they are connecting with, and how they perceive WMU throughout the year. The study will include four interviews with each student and analyses of secondary data from WMU's various student tracking systems.

The initial interviews in early October will focus on the students' transition to WMU. Interviews in late November or early December will ask students to reflect on their first semester. Third interviews in mid-February will focus on belonging, connection, and well-being. In the final interview, conducted in April, students will be asked if they intend to return and explain why and how they came to that decision.

We expect this student to generate insights into students' experiences during their first year on campus. We will also be able to compare students who return in fall 2025 with those who do not, which may yield ideas for improving current interventions or reveal a need for new ones. In addition to addressing belonging and well-being, the interviews could include specific questions about EFG initiatives. A collaboration between the EFG evaluation team and Student Affairs on this is an opportunity for the 2024-25 EFG evaluation.

Bronco Connect

How does the Bronco Connect scholarship impact recipients' retention at WMU over time? The Bronco Connect scholarship supports on-campus housing for a student's first and second years at WMU. It is worth investigating if and how the scholarship affects their retention at WMU or other factors related to their success at

the University. This question can be addressed through periodic interviews with scholarship recipients while they are at WMU.

Bronco Promise

What is the impact of Bronco Promise scholarships on enrollment? In other words, to what extent do recipients choose WMU because of the scholarship? Currently, the Office of Institutional Research is conducting a statistical analysis to examine the effect of Bronco Promise scholarships on first-to-second year retention. This analysis will compare groups of eligible students just before and after the start of the Bronco Promise to estimate the degree to which receiving the scholarship affects the likelihood of retention while controlling for variables associated with positive academic outcomes (e.g., high school GPA). We also recommend gathering qualitative data to learn from students directly about the scholarship's impact on their decision to continue at WMU or other factors related to their experience at the University.

Broncos Lead

Students who seek out and secure internships are probably already doing very well compared with their peers in most areas where EFG seeks impact. Therefore, we don't recommend investing additional resources to assess the program's impact on belonging, wellness, or sense of purpose. Rather, we propose investigating two questions to better understand the program's value:

To what extent is Broncos Lead broadening the types of students who participate in internships in terms of major?

The list of majors of Broncos Lead interns suggests that the program may be tapping a broader pool of students. We propose analyzing data from WMU's Post Graduation Activity Report (PGAR) survey to develop a longitudinal view of graduates' reported participation in internships – overall, by major, and by employment sector. If Broncos Lead is creating more opportunities for a wider spectrum of students to participate in internships, that effect should manifest in the PGAR data.

What is the value-added of the Broncos Lead-specific dimensions of the internships? Broncos Lead internships have features that traditional internships do not. Interns participate in professional development workshops, and Broncos Lead staff monitor the internships by engaging with both the interns and the internship hosts. It may be possible to compare Broncos Lead internships with other non-Broncos Lead internships held by WMU students to ascertain the value of these program features. At a minimum, the survey of interns can be enhanced to capture valuable data about soft and hard skill development, network expansion, effect on career plans, and other possible internship outcomes or aspects of the experience.

Health and Well-Being

Holistic health and well-being initiatives are perhaps the most challenging to study, due to myriad factors. For example, these initiatives can potentially impact all WMU students; they often deal with sensitive matters where privacy is a high priority, making data collection difficult; health and wellness is affected by a variety of factors; and a desirable outcome of some activities can be the *absence* of a problem or event. We welcome the opportunity to work with EFG and Health and Well-Being initiative stakeholders to clarify and prioritize needs for evaluation in this area.

A fairly straightforward approach would be to ask **How are specific health and well-being activities and resources (e.g., Common Ground, Essential Needs, outreach and training) affecting the students who engage with them? What, if any, opportunities are there to strengthen implementation? What, if any, promising practices could be adopted in other parts of the University?** These questions can be investigated through mixed methods including interviews, surveys, and participant observation.

Navigator Network

Given that the Navigator Network is the most far-reaching of all the EFG-funded initiatives (along with the Student Success Hub), it would not be a leap to attribute future improvements in retention and graduation, at least in part, to the Network's work. We will continue to track retention and graduation overall and for key demographic groups. If we observe a marked and sustained improvement beginning in 2022 or shortly after, that will serve as evidence of the Network's effectiveness. If we do not observe a noticeable disruption in historical trends, that will suggest the Network isn't having the desired impact. Either way, it will take a few years to observe a sustained effect (or lack of effect).

The distributed nature of the Navigator Network has created challenges related to its coordination and oversight. Therefore, in the short term, it may be worthwhile to conduct **ongoing formative evaluation**, building on the survey of Navigator Network staff members conducted in summer 2024.

We could also investigate the question, **How do students experience the Navigator Network?** by interviewing students who have engaged with Network staff and participated in Navigator Network events.

Student Success Hub

Because EFG covers only about 15% of the Student's Success Hub annual budget, we do not think it is worth investing EFG's evaluation resources into assessing the systems' impact on students' belonging, wellness, learning, or retention. Rather, we recommend leveraging the data the Hub houses as a source of information for the evaluation.

Tenacity Scholarships

What is the impact of Tenacity scholarships on recipients' retention? Given EFG's substantial support of Tenacity (\$800,000 per year), it is worth investigating the return on investment in terms of student retention and graduation.

Tenacity scholarships are intended to help upper-division students stay at WMU by paying their outstanding tuition and fee balances up to \$1,000. Because the students who receive tenacity scholarships may have been unlikely to persist at WMU in the short-term, any impact should be seen in a gradual improvement in four- and six-year graduation rates over time. Additionally, similar to the analysis currently being conducted on the Bronco Promise scholarships, we suggest it may be possible to statistically evaluate the effects of tenacity scholarships on retention and graduation while controlling for the variables associated more generally with student success at WMU.

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Appendices

Overall EFG and Initiative-Specific Logic Models