

Judith Kelley:

When we think about how to help student outcomes, normally we think about schools and how to improve what happens in the school so that those students will have better outcomes. But in this episode, we're going to talk about things that happen outside of school and how they may impact student outcomes.

In 2005, a group of 14 community leaders convened at the home of Tony and Teddy Brown school board members, representatives from University of North Carolina, North Carolina Central University, Duke University, and Durham Academy administrators sat at a table and dreamt of a new way to empower Durham Public School students to own their education.

That's a quote from the founding story of a program here in Durham, North Carolina called Student U. And the project was envisioned by three students in a Duke class, Mary Williams, Amanda Dorsey, and Dan Kimberg. They had all taken social entrepreneurship with the legendary Sanford professor, Tony Brown. So starting with that meeting, Student U began to take shape. Today, close to 20 years later, the program supports first generation students through middle school, high school, college, and beyond. Here with me in the studio is the former director of Student U, Alexandra Zagbayou. Welcome, Alexandra.

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Thank you for having me.

Judith Kelley:

Alexandra is now a professor of the practice here at the Sanford School, and also we have Sarah Komisarow. Sarah recently conducted research on Student U and she looked at whether providing this kind of education, nutrition, social support services to middle and high school students outside of school makes a difference in their lives. Welcome Sarah.

Sarah Komisarow:

Thanks so much for having me.

Judith Kelley:

Sarah is an assistant professor here at the Sanford School of Public Policy and I am Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of the Public Policy at Duke University. Alexandra, let's start with you. Can you just describe sort of basic strokes of Student U for us? How does it work?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

So Student U starts recruiting students in fifth grade, works with all of the elementary schools in Durham public schools to recruit classes of between 50 to 60 students in journeys with those students, their parents, their guardians, family members from sixth grade through college graduation. The programming happens after school where students have afterschool programming every day. And then during the summers students come to one of the Durham Academy campuses and have classes for five weeks. They have Global Connect, which is our version of social studies. They take English classes, they take math, they take science, they take collective, they go on experiential learning field trips. Another important part of the Student U secret sauce, in addition to 11 years of continuous programming, is all the additional wraparound services that we provide students and families. Student U has a full-time social worker and a team of social workers that not only support students but their parents.

We also have access to funding to support families who might need it or help connect them to other resources in the Durham community. The last big piece of Student U programming is intense college advising, which starts really in sixth grade, but intensifies that students continue to grow to make sure that we're helping first generation college students think about not just the north star of education beyond high school, but really demystify the process and the benchmarks you have to hit to be able to get a post-secondary degree that aligns our students' talents with their dreams for the world.

Judith Kelley:

So just let me get this straight. You ask students to come to Student U to do more school?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

And they want to do that?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Honestly, the fifth grade applications of our students are some of the most powerful things I've got to read in my career as educators, our students are very clear about what they hope is true in the world and also how broken the world is and want to get the skills they need to be able to not just change their lives, but be part of changing the world. And I think that what drives them and motivates them to not just think about it as like this is more school. This is an investment in my future self and it's really moving to see fifth grade students have that level of clarity and also to see their parents have that same clarity and also commitment because it is a long time.

Students come not just because of the schooling, but another thing that is harder to measure is the community. What students get is a lifelong set of students who they've known for half of their lives who are committed to the same idea of wanting to be part of changing the world by changing their life. And I think that that is really motivating and probably 50% of why they show up, [inaudible 00:05:14] their friends and they happen to do something that is good for them, but they build those bonds, those vertical horizontal allies that we know are really important for transformative education, particularly for students of color..

Judith Kelley:

You were talking about these fifth grade essays, the applications, and you said they were really moving. Without necessarily getting into the details of any one particular student. Can you give an example of the kind of thought processes these students are expressing when they're appealing to get admitted?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Yeah, and I think it's also important to recognize that we got to a place probably three years in where actually the application doesn't matter because they're fifth grade students. What we see is like, wow, this student has dreams, but we don't actually use any of the information to decide whether a student gets into the program or not and I think that's really important. What we're looking for is first generation college students who are interested in going to post-secondary school.

But I remember students... it was really interesting, most of our students only grew up in post-Obama life. And so for them wanting to be presidents was the norm, I want to be President of the United States

for X, Y, Z's reasons. Or we have students who are Latinx who wanted to be, I want to be the first Latinx President of the United States. Or I remember a student who wrote about gender equity, had a sibling that was LGBTQ and wrote about the need to have laws that protect family members. We've had students write about DACA and wanting to be immigration lawyers to protect their families.

I think what I find inspiring is that students are really aware of the potential and the brokenness of the world. These are not flowery dreams that are not rooted in reality. I think the ability to recognize in fifth grade, here are some challenges that are present in my community and here are the ways that I want to devote my life in service of changing what is not right in the world, I think to me has always been the most inspiring. And they also get to draw, some of them draw beautiful things, which I think is cool.

Judith Kelley:

So you said the essay is part of the application because you want to get to know them and as you're thinking about how to let people in, but it actually turns out that you end up needing to turn to a mechanism like a lottery to admit people. Is that right?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Yeah. And again, when Student U started, we did have an interview process and as we ourselves deepen our own understanding and application of equity and understanding structural racism, recognizing that in an application process there are biases. I might pick the child who was dressed like a little version of myself and it's actually not helpful. So the lottery for us, our team would actually go through a pretty extensive process of making sure students met the requirements of being in the program, put all of the students' information and use a lottery system to pick classes of 50 to 60 students. We always try, it is important to Student U to be family oriented. And so whether we had 50 or 60 students really dependent on how many siblings were in the lottery because we worked with students for 11 years, if we noticed that like, oh, they're going to be eight siblings, we wanted to have 50, I would call them clean slots that were open to anyone in the community in order to grow our ability to just support more students.

Judith Kelley:

So obviously you don't like saying no and using a lottery has at least some equity, everybody has the same chance, et cetera. But Sarah, it turns out that... why you probably are not also a fan of saying no, the lottery was particularly an interesting feature to you, right?

Sarah Komisarow:

Yeah, that's right. So I think back in 2015 or so, Dan Kimberg was a friend of mine and we had been catching up and I said, how are things at Student U going? And in conversation it came up that there was a newly introduced feature of the program that was a lottery. And just as Alexandra explained to us, the recognition that an interview process is not always sort of the ideal, and it was that word lottery that really caught my attention. And as an economist, I stopped him. I said, "Wait a minute, tell me that again. You use a lottery?" He said, "Yeah, well we're getting more applications at this point than we have spaces available. And the interview process or strategies that we had used previously were coming to recognize that these have some other problems with them. So yeah, that's what we're doing."

And as an economist, as a researcher, that's very exciting because lotteries are very, very close to what in social science research would be called a randomized controlled trial, which is a great way to study a program and its impact because you have groups of students that experienced Student U and a

comparison group of students that unfortunately they don't win the lottery. But for research purposes, we get to compare these groups and see what their outcomes look like several years down the road.

Judith Kelley:

And the key is that we believe that the students who don't get into the lottery for all practical purposes on average, are equivalent to the ones that ...

Sarah Komisarow:

Yep. So that's exactly right. They're equal in expectation. And so what that means is that there wasn't something about who they were or the choices they made. There wasn't anything about them that determined their sort of selection into Student U. And for that reason, we think that these two groups should be sort of identical to one another and gives us a great way to compare them.

Judith Kelley:

So drum roll. Did the lottery work? When you compare the baseline data, was it very similar and what was the baseline data that you were looking at?

Sarah Komisarow:

So yeah, fast-forward a couple of years through a process linking Student U's application records to some administrative education data that's housed here at the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke, we're able to compare, do these students look like each other and we can look at their school experiences up to fifth grades. So things like their test scores, things they've done as part of their normal public school experience. We can look at their demographic characteristics, race and ethnicity, gender, a couple other measures of sort of family circumstance and save for a few, which that can happen in a small lottery. These two groups look identical in terms of their characteristics and their past school experiences.

Student U students are first generation students and so typically, when we look at them statistically, compared to the rest of the Durham Public schools and actually Durham charter schools populations, the students are a little bit more likely to come from a family with a low income. We don't actually have a good measure of parental education, but income might be sort of correlated with being the first person in your family to go to college, not always. Student U's applicants are almost exclusively students of color. So I think in the years of data was upwards of 90 to 95% of the applicants were identifying themselves as students of color. I think students perhaps were also a bit more likely to be female, just not exactly a 50-50 split. Just a little bit more of the applicant pool is female-

Judith Kelley:

What about the academic performance of the students?

Sarah Komisarow:

Yeah, thanks. Academic performance, the one measure that we have consistently across all students is the fifth grade end of grade test score and that's something that students take as part of their fifth grade school experience in North Carolina Public schools and on average students that apply are doing, I think a bit worse than students overall in Durham and their scores are at a level that's below the statewide average.

Judith Kelley:

Which is exactly Alexandra, what you want to try to target because that's the population you're trying to help.

Alexandra Zagbayou:

And if you also look at Durham Public Schools for first generation college students and students of color, that tracks.

Judith Kelley:

So Alexandra, we know just from the data that Student U collects itself and anecdotal data as well, that there are a lot of success stories. And do you wanted to share a little bit about how Student U normally thinks about whether or not it's working or not?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

The data you report, a hundred percent high school graduation, 90% go on to college, 55% graduate from there. Those are important. I think the other thing we pay attention to is the experience of students and their parents during our time. Student U, one of the reasons why we were able to work with Sarah is because we collect a lot of data, and that is because of Dr. Sunny Ladd, who was part of the original brainchild that was like, you need to keep all your data always all the time. So we still keep all of our data always all the time. So we ask about the experience of students, how are we being culturally competent? How are children feeling safe? Beyond just the metrics that we talk about that I just named.

We also think about the social emotional health of students. We think about the positive racial identity development of students and worked with Dr. Elan Hope, she was at the time at NC State to develop a positive racial identity development scale that she will come and do with our students during the summer. So for us, all of those things matter. I think we want to be not just... we want to think about predictive data and how do we use that to inform our programming can make real life change as well as the outcome-based data, which we know is the goal. So always trying to balance both of those things. And then being really clear that the goal for me and I think for the organization is to be part of communal transformation. And so the stories are really important.

On my first day here in the fall, I bumped into a Student U student that I've known since she was in seventh grade who is getting her law degree at Central and her MPP here at Duke. And that matters, the 11-year pipeline did what it needed to do, but she also still comes to my office and it's like, help me understand how to navigate this place that is new and different from me. And so trying to also think about those realities that data that's not quite captured or we can't translate to other people, but we know matters because we are in deep relationship with our students and their families.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, so obviously these are the outcomes that ultimately we really care about that are meaningful. But Sarah, we also want from a scholarly perspective and from the perspective of being able to turn around and say to policymakers, these are the kinds of programs you may or may not want to invest in. We need to have some evaluations that focus on results that truly we can say we're confident in these findings. So share a little bit about what you looked at, which I believe was outcomes as early as ninth grade and why you did that and what kind of things you found.

Sarah Komisarow:

Yeah, that's right. So in the study that I did, we were looking at students who entered Student U at the time of the beginning of the program. So this is rising sixth graders but then we were able to look at their outcomes as they sort of experienced early high school. And the ones that I chose to focus on in the paper, part of it was practical, were relying on administrative data that's collected as part of a student's school experience, but part of it, as you said, is really being able to say, we want to know how are students doing in ninth grade and communicate these things to policy makers.

So the three main outcomes that I focused on were course credit accumulation in ninth grade because we know that accumulating enough ninth grade credits to transition to 10th grade is important in terms of predicting whether you'll graduate from high school and what you might do in post-secondary. So course credits. We did look at grade point average because that is a widely used measure, not only in high school, but as you transition to post-secondary, our state institutions have typically GPA cutoffs for admissions, things like this. And then also I looked at the probability or the likelihood of involvement with a disciplinary outcome and that's because that is measured in the North Carolina data-

Judith Kelley:

Such as suspension.

Sarah Komisarow:

Exactly. So suspension and then we have some other measures. They're definitely not perfect, but some measures of other reported infractions, even those that don't result in a suspension. And again, there's some sort of practicality in that these were measured not only for the students that won the lottery that were part of Student U, but importantly for this comparison group that we're tracking in parallel to see how their high school experiences are different. And so the punchline here is that Student U students, and particularly those that entered the program with lower test scores as fifth graders accumulated more credits by the end of ninth grade. So almost a full credit more in terms of the courses that they're taking as ninth graders. They had higher grade point averages and they were much, much less likely to have received any disciplinary consequence like a suspension. So all sort of very positive outcomes when compared to this comparison group that in some ways unfortunately did not get a lottery spot in the program.

Judith Kelley:

Are you surprised by any of the things that Sarah was finding, or is it more or less than what you self think we are seeing in the program?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

No, I think from a strategic perspective, as you mentioned policy and talking to other people, I think we knew that the program is having positive outcomes, but what we couldn't articulate is how... the only students, we interact with other students who are in the program, so we can say this is working for them, but we can't say this program is having outside impact because we don't know the students who are not in the program. So Sarah gave us the ability to not just stand strong on our anecdotal data in what we are seeing in our students, but to be able to say, actually students who did not... using policy terms, the student youth intervention are having a very different experience. And I think it's important to recognize that the school-to-prison pipeline primarily affects students of color as boys are even more impacted by the school-to-prison and so it's a fundamental measure that needs to be tracked in order to think about how can we be part of disrupting that and ensuring that students have access to college.

And I think that for us, recognizing that the investments we put in the social emotional health of students, in having peers that are also receiving the same kind of support and have the same language and frame and communities to support their dreams are interventions that we think all schools should be doing. And I think in this season, what the pandemic has forced is for school systems to recognize that investments in social emotional learning should not just be one off, but should be core to the syllabus and the curriculum, which we could have told them that 10 years ago because it was always part of our program to recognize that we needed to think holistically about the mental health of students, the ecosystem and environment supporting them, which we were grateful that the data could support that at the time.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah.

Sarah Komisarow:

Can I just echo? I think that's totally right. So for me, what this is showing is that you build this... I think Alex's words were ecosystem, this sustained, continuous, all the words that this is an 11-year plus. And so starting in fifth grade all the way up to ninth grade, it's this intentional community. It's having people that say, what are your dreams? How do you get there? All of those things I think are part of the story about why we see these decreased suspension outcomes because I think this really is just to echo Alex's words, disruption of the school-to-prison pipeline by building this supportive community. And as we learned that it's not only affecting the student, it's affecting their families and their day-to-day experience, day in and day out.

Judith Kelley:

So one thing you said I thought was interesting, Sarah, was that you were seeing greater benefits for the students that were on the lowest end of the performance scale entering the program.

Sarah Komisarow:

That's right.

Judith Kelley:

In some ways that makes sense because there's more room for improvement, but how should we think about that? Now, I'm interested in both of your thoughts about that because one reaction would be, well, let's target that group even more as they seem to be benefiting more, but another thought might be no, it's actually the being part of a community, of a mixture of students who are performing at different levels and that even if you are performing at high levels, that doesn't mean you're going to get to go to college, et cetera. So still the marginal gains for those students might still be incredibly meaningful. So I just welcome... Sarah, why don't you start commenting on that?

Sarah Komisarow:

Yeah, sure. I think there's something you said there that's always sort of summarized or reflected my own interpretation, which is this is a program that serves all students in terms... there are requirements to get into the program, but then it's not targeted just at students with certain test scores or anything like this. Because to me, what we see in the data is that yes, it was students that entered the program with lower test scores where we saw the biggest benefits, but to me, the interpretation of what the data

tells us is because they're in this program that is made up of students from all sort of test score backgrounds. The data that I have don't really say what would it be like if we had this sort of more narrowed or targeted or restricted entrance requirement based on test scores.

The other thing I'll add is that what's interesting to me, and I think what really speaks to what we would call mechanism or channel through which why does Student U work, what's the secret sauce? We saw in the data that in early ninth grade, students had, like I said, better credit accumulation, higher GPA, less involvement with suspension, but we didn't actually see test score impacts in eighth grade. And so even though in some ways I think we want to say, oh, it's really because of students enter the program with low test scores and look, they have better outcomes. That's not the only goal of Student U and I think what these outcomes are reflecting is that the program is doing so much more than producing sort of a narrow test score gain.

Things like credit accumulation, grade point average, these are outcomes that reflect all sorts of skills. How do you show up for a class? How do you interact with your peers? How do you do your day-to-day sort of school experience? And that's really different than just a sort of narrow test score gain, at least in my mind. And again, it's coming through this program that is comprised of students from the whole test score distribution.

Judith Kelley:

So Alexandra, this is a pretty expensive program. How much does it cost per student to run this program?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

So it's interesting. Some people would say it's expensive, some people would say it's not expensive. Actually, I think at the time, and again, my data is two years old, was around 4,000, 4,500 per student per year, which is I think around national average actually lower than what people pay for out of school time. That 4,000 is for a whole year but also when you think about the return on investment over time, that is a very small amount of money to invest for the transformation that we see in the lives of students, but also what the students end up going to do beyond their time. And so I think that 1, the data suggests that we are not that expensive when we think about it, but I think that when we want to broaden the reality and talk about return of investment long term, I think that the investment is actually quite minimal.

Judith Kelley:

But when we think about... it's wonderful that it are able to support that program. I'm wondering, Sarah, from a perspective of thinking of advice to policymakers around programs like this, is that something you've had a chance to share or what would your advice be if you did?

Sarah Komisarow:

I guess my advice, federal support and state support are really crucial to running programs like Student U and others that are similar. Just as Alex mentioned, the 21st Century Community Learning Center grants is a source of federal support that comes to programs that are doing these out of school time or out of school support interventions. And that's a program that we've seen just grow hugely since the late nineties and is a really important source for organizations like Student U. So continuing to fund federal programs that provide these types of grants to community organizations so that they can continue providing support services, I think that's sort of recommendation number one.

State grants as well, I think play a slightly smaller role in the overall budget if you were looking at the aggregate picture but those are just as important. And just as Alex said, I'll echo that on a per student basis, I did a little bit of analysis of some of Student U's financial records, and the program compares very favorably in terms of its per student spending to other programs, at least in the scholarly literature that have been studied, that are typically much more expensive to run.

And as Alex said, the metric we really do care about is benefits relative to cost instead of just cost alone. And programs like this that are increasing outcomes not only in ninth grade, but high school graduation, post-secondary outcomes, these are the benefits that are long-lived that impact a student and their family over their entire lives. And so we really are seeing very large benefits relative to these small costs that yes, it's six years, but then a student has sort of a lifetime of benefits that follow them.

Judith Kelley:

Alexandra, you said a little bit about now consulting with others, partly based on the fact that there's even more evidence now for the fact that the model works. Are we seeing any real steps being taken in other cities or states to replicate any of this?

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Yeah, so when I was ED and when Dan was Ed, probably once a month, twice a month, I would get an email from someone asking if we would take our model to Chicago, to South Carolina, to Raleigh, and there is actually a school in Gaston, North Carolina that essentially is replicating our model. They spent a year with us and we have... Student U has a playbook. And so this school is called the Gaston Dream Center, is essentially replicating the model in Gaston, North Carolina, and we have gone to see their work and they're showing incredible outcomes. We made an intentional decision to not make that a Student U site. The reality is that once you start to replicate and grow, you divide attention. And part of the reason why Student U is as successful as we are is that we are focused and we go deep in community.

And our program has been designed based on the assets that were present in Durham. And so going to other cities would require how do you keep the essence of the model and how do you localize it in what is true in the assets of communities, which is a different set of skills and time that the board at the time felt was not our priority. Our priority is Durham, and we are open to sharing with other people what we do and what we hope over time is that that builds a network of people across, whether it's the state of North Carolina or the US who are using similar methodologies and that we can learn from each other, but recognize that everything has to be localized in the right context with the right assets and the relationship and conversation with barriers, which we are not going to be experts in, but we can continue to deepen our practice and [inaudible 00:29:48].

Judith Kelley:

It's really exciting to think that something like this might have started with an idea in a class. So just any final thoughts on sort of our theory of change and how all these actors I think are coming together because there's an idea in a class, but then there's a ton of people out in the community who are actually doing the work and the heavy lifting.

Sarah Komisarow:

All I have to say, all the credit to the people who are actually doing the work. I consider myself just a very, very small piece of this thousand piece jigsaw puzzle. We know that this program has impact, but

the real work is being done by the students, their families, and the staff who work there. As a person who's been watching Student U since that very first summer in 2007, it's just been amazing to see it grow from what I would consider to be almost like a little seedling of an idea in a Duke class to this enormous tree that has roots in the community and that really is growing to spread its work, its knowledge, and its understandings to other groups in North Carolina.

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Yeah, for me certainly feels like full circle, even though I'm not from Duke, now being at Duke teaching in the program where this idea that I got to be a part of and certainly changed my life has... it feels like very humbling. I would say that I think about what are the assets that communities have and what are the assets that universities have and how do we align those in order to be part of communal transformation? And so I think that the Student U story, it's not just that three students had an idea, it's that three students had a question and the humility to know that that question could not be answered without input, direction, and investment from the community.

I call that group of people in my mind, I think of them of as the community of 14 who were invested members of the Durham community who didn't say, oh, that's a great idea, who actually said, here is what we want to be true in our community and here's the need, and you all have energy and you have the resource of Duke. And if you want to align your energy and the resource of Duke to actually answer the question that we have about our own community, then let's align your energy, your questions, and the resource of Duke in service of Durham.

And I think that when universities recognize that that is their role, to not be the driver of the change, but a participant for the vision that the community itself has for itself, I think that's where the magic happens. And I think in the Hart program, that is what we're trying to shape in our students, that their ideas and their desire for transformation is important and needs to be rooted in the self-determination and the assets and the vision that the community has for itself. I think that's why Student U has been successful.

Judith Kelley:

I think it's a very hopeful story, and in these days, we all need sources of hope that we can come together to try to address some of these challenges. And so I thank both of you for the role that you've played in moving this forward and for coming in and talking with me today. Thank you so much.

Alexandra Zagbayou:

Thank you for having me.

Sarah Komisarow:

Thanks for having me.

Judith Kelley:

Alexandra Zagbayou was part of the founding team of Student U in Durham, North Carolina. She's now an associate professor of the practice in the Hart leadership program here at Sanford School. She's working to inspire the next generation of leaders. She's also a faculty affiliate at the Center for the Study of Philanthropy and volunteerism. Sarah Komisarow is a faculty member in the Sanford School of Public Policy and a faculty affiliate at the Durham Center for Child and Family Policy. And we'll have a link both to Student U and Sarah's research at our website, policy360.org.

While you are at that website, take a listen to some other episodes. If you want to focus on Child and Family Policy, episode 139 considers a bipartisan report that calls for rebalancing US priorities towards children. Episode 136 digs into how COVID-19 relates to young people and their parents' mental health. And if you want another story, inspiring story about social entrepreneurship, listen to episode 132, which was my conversation with Dr. Jim Yong Kim, who was a student at Harvard, and he co-founded an organization that grew into an influential nonprofit, Partners in Health, together with Dr. Paul Farmer. Thank you so much for listening. We'll be back with another episode soon. I'm Judith Kelley.