

# The Martin Scholars: The Impact of Developmental Networks During Emerging Adulthood

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Emerging adulthood is a critical time for identity exploration, self-discovery, and development. Individuals often experience turbulence due to the significant change happening across cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual domains in their lives. The current study provides an in-depth analysis of a college mentoring program centered around personal and professional development. Results reveal a strong connection between individual wellbeing, through positive career development and psychosocial outcomes of the program, and participation in program activities. The case provides a program model for other academic institutions to consider, and even emulate, that have the shared goal of promoting greater wellbeing throughout the college student population.

*Keywords:* Developmental networks, mentoring, emerging adults, wellbeing

## Introduction

Emerging adulthood, defined as the period of development from the late teens to the mid-twenties, is a critical time for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). This phase of life is often marked by the “college years” and can be characterized as a period of significant change, especially in academic, professional and emotional areas of life (Arnett, 2018). Throughout this complicated developmental phase, emerging adults experience increased levels of personal agency and decision-making yet decreasing levels of support and structure from traditional sources like family and school (Wood et al., 2018). As a result, experiences during this period of development vary greatly, with some experiencing a positive trajectory and others struggling to find their way. In fact, individuals with low self-efficacy often experience confusion and fear from feelings of instability and a lack of social support (Arnett et al., 2014). This finding aligns with the general notion shared by Schulenberg et al., (2004) that while individual wellbeing is usually persistent, emerging adulthood is a time when the state of wellbeing can change considerably for better or worse.

## Literature Review

Mentoring has been cited as influential in the development of emerging adults. Providing two primary functions to the mentoring relationship, career development and psychosocial support, mentors guide proteges with experience and knowledge to encourage career and personal growth (Kram, 1985). However, contemporary scholarship advances our understanding

of mentoring by examining and offering a developmental network perspective for mentorship (Higgins & Kram, 2001) that suggests individuals receive guidance and support from several people who are actively interested and invested in their development. These developmental networks include multiple mentoring relationships within and outside organizational contexts as well as across varying hierarchies of superiors, peers, subordinates (Dobrow & Higgins, 2005).

Developmental networks during emerging adulthood offer substantial benefits across various domains of development (Kram & Higgins, 2009). By providing emotional support, guidance, and opportunities for growth, developmental networks - also called “board of mentors” by Kram and Higgins (2009) - facilitate the transition into adulthood, promoting resilience, educational and vocational success, and a well-defined identity. Investing in mentoring support programs and fostering a variety of mentoring relationships can thus have lasting positive impacts on individuals. Developmental, or mentoring, networks during emerging adulthood provides individuals with a sense of stability and emotional support that facilitates identity exploration and complex decision-making regarding personal beliefs, values, relationships, and life goals (Rhodes, 2005). Studies have also connected mentors and/or mentoring networks to individual wellbeing in the following ways: promote psychological resilience (Beals, Zinny, Lyons & Bobbitt, 2021); reduce feelings of isolation (Karcher, David & Powell, 2022); increase academic motivation and self-efficacy (McClain, Kelner & Elledge, 2021); build confidence and enhance self-esteem (Schwartz, Lowe & Rhodes, 2021); reduce relational uncertainty (Mansson

& Myers, 2013), and help manage personal and professional stressors more effectively (McCallum et al, 2023).

To further examine the role of developmental networks on the wellbeing of emerging adults, the following research questions provided the foundation for the study:

RQ1: What are the primary impacts of the Martin Scholars program on student wellbeing?

RQ2: What are the program features that facilitate those impacts?

### **Program**

This case study examines the Martin Scholars program, a prestigious, year-long experience housed in the Martin Center for Mentorship. Designed for a small cohort of high-performing undergraduates selected from a competitive application process, the program blends academic coursework with immersive professional development, site visits, networking opportunities, and structured mentoring. Based on surveys, observational data, and interviews with participants, the study explores the program's unique context as a model for understanding the role of developmental networks and mentoring in student wellbeing.

#### **Martin Scholars Program**

The Martin Scholars program began in 2016 with an inaugural class of 10 students and class sizes varying from 10-17 students each year thereafter. Applicants are typically fourth year students who are selected based on the strength of their academic record, professional experience, extracurricular and co-curricular involvement on campus, professional goals and performance in panel interview with students and faculty. The program involves a three-hour course per semester, fall retreat, site visits to local agencies and corporations, panel discussions with communication professionals, networking dinners/receptions, and multi-day site visits in New York, Atlanta, and Washington DC. In addition, scholars are paired with an individual mentor who meets with them throughout the year.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Participants included in this study are all alumni of the Martin Scholars program (N=99) who graduated between 2017 and 2024. We used a combination of surveys, observations, and interviews to inform this case study. The primary

data source was an online survey designed and administered via email using Qualtrics during a two-week period in May 2025. The survey included 19 questions - a combination of multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions - aimed at helping us understand participant experiences with the program. We had a response rate of 55.5% (n=53) with fairly equal representation from each cohort. In addition to our survey data, we reviewed transcripts and notes from exit interviews conducted since the program's inception.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to summarize participant responses and identify patterns across the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These analyses were conducted using Qualtrics, allowing for an overview of trends and relationships within the sample. Complementing this, we analyzed qualitative survey responses, interview responses and observations using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and contextual insights that deepened the interpretation of the survey findings, supporting an integrated understanding of the research questions.

### **Findings**

The case study explored the features of the Martin Scholars program and the impact of those features on scholar wellbeing. Data were analyzed through the lens of developmental networks, more specifically career development and psychosocial support, as they relate to wellbeing.

#### **Career Development**

Data suggests that the Martin Scholars program supports career development most by helping students develop network connections as well as shape professional identity. More specifically, and as Table 1 indicates, most survey respondents strongly agreed with the following statements: The Martin Scholars program helped me build connections and expand my network (77.4%), and The Martin Scholars helped shape my professional identity (58.5%). Notably, when asked to rank 10 program features from most (1) to least impactful (10) on career development outcomes, where each feature received a unique ranking, participants ranked networking events (M = 3.50), the spring break trip (M = 3.71), and local site visits (M = 4.53) as most impactful.

**Table 1***Percentage of Agreement, Career Development Statements/Outcomes (n = 53)*

	Strongly Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Neither agree/Disagree		Somewhat Agree		Strongly Agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The Martin Scholars program helped shape my professional identity.	1	1.9	3	5.7	2	3.8	16	30.2	31	58.5
The Martin Scholars program helped me explore my career interests.	0	0	3	5.7	0	0	24	45.3	26	49.1
My experience in the Martin Scholars program helped me reach my professional goals.	0	0	4	7.5	11	20.8	14	26.4	24	45.3
The Martin Scholars program helped me build connections and expand my network.	0	0	1	1.9	3	5.7	8	15.1	41	77.4
The Martin Scholars program better prepared me for the transition from college to career.	0	0	1	1.9	4	7.5	22	41.5	26	49.1

Qualitative data support these findings with one respondent sharing, “Before I was a Martin Scholar, I was not as confident in how to build a professional network and did not know many people who had the same professional goals as I did. After graduating from the program, I felt much more confident in how to navigate my career and professional life, felt I had built a strong network of impactful connections and was ready to take on any challenges that came my way.”

Referring specifically to skills developed in the program, another added, “I cannot overstate the importance of the interviewing skills, networking abilities, and succinct elevator pitch that I gained from my time as a Martin Scholar.” Another said, “The Martin Scholars program helped me develop my communications skills in a number of ways. The site visits and networking events gave me the opportunity to meet so many wonderful communications leaders. I have grown in many ways.”

One participant captured how the program helped them to define their professional path this way, “The Martin Scholars program was pivotal in shaping both my personal and professional path. Before the program I had no clear direction. It offered me the grace, space, and support to explore different industries, ultimately helping me discover who I wanted to be beyond the walls of CofC. Even years later, knowing there’s a strong,

supportive network I can tap into if needed remains invaluable.”

### **Psychosocial Support**

Data reveals that the Martin Scholars program has a significant impact on wellbeing, and more specifically, on mental, emotional, and social health.

Specifically citing confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, and sense of belonging, the program positively impacted several areas of participant wellbeing. As outlined in Table 2, the greatest impact of the program related to psychosocial support appears to be the peer community, with 64.2% of respondents strongly agreeing that the program allowed them to feel like an important part of a community. Closely following the sense of belonging through community is the increased confidence experienced. A majority of respondents strongly agreed that the program increased their confidence (62.3%) and made them feel more confident in their ability to succeed (54.7%).

Finally, the majority of respondents also strongly agree that the program heightened self-awareness (58.5%) and enhanced self-esteem (58.5%). Relative to psychosocial support outcomes, participants ranked the relationship with program leadership (M = 3.55), the peer community (M = 3.96), and the formal mentor relationship (M = 5.03) as the most impactful features of the program.

**Table 2**  
*Percentage of Agreement, Psychosocial Outcomes (n = 53)*

	Strongly Disagree		Somewhat Disagree		Neither Agree/ Disagree		Somewhat Agree		Strongly Agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The Martin Scholars program made me feel emotionally supported.	1	1.9	2	3.8	10	18.9	17	32.1	23	43.4
The Martin Scholars program enhanced my self-esteem.	0	0	3	5.7	5	9.4	14	26.4	31	58.5
The Martin Scholars program increased my confidence.	0	0	2	3.8	3	5.7	15	28.3	33	62.3
The Martin Scholars program heightened my self-awareness.	0	0	0	0	6	11.3	16	30.2	31	58.5
The Martin Scholars program helped me crystallize and articulate my values.	0	0	2	3.8	10	18.9	17	32.1	24	45.3
As a Martin Scholar, I felt like I was an important part of a community.	0	0	1	1.9	2	3.8	16	30.2	34	64.2
I felt better equipped to handle the challenges of adulthood after participating in the Martin Scholars program.	0	0	4	7.5	12	22.6	23	43.4	13	26.4
I feel more confident in my ability to succeed because of my experience as a Martin Scholar.	1	1.9	0	0	5	9.4	18	34.0	29	54.7

Qualitative data support these findings with one respondent sharing:

It helped with a lot of my fears and anxieties when it came to post-grad life. It also helped me see previous Martin Scholars be extremely successful in their careers, and knowing I had a strong network of former scholars I can lean on if things get tough with the job search. I felt like I had people in my corner who were cheering me on. I had a lot of anxiety about graduating, but with every site visit, connection made, and elevator pitch, the anxiety got quieter, and I felt like I had the resources and the confidence to succeed.

Another focused on how the program gave them a reason to believe in themselves, Before I became a Martin scholar, I didn't have much faith in myself. As someone who grew up having learning disabilities and constantly trying my best, but not having that be reflected in my grades, really put my confidence in the gutter. After going through the MS program, I felt a new sense of belonging not only in school but in myself.

A final participant summarized the spirit of community, confidence, and support this way:

When I learned I'd been nominated to be a Martin Scholar, I felt a sense of accomplishment and pride just to be nominated, and I realized how much I liked that feeling...If I had not been nominated, I would have never tried to apply for the program myself because I just felt like it would be out of my league... Even just going through the application and interviewing process was really enlightening because I had no ambitions when it came to a career after college. Just realizing that I liked how it felt to be good at something changed my whole perspective and made me want to try harder and be better. When I graduated as a Martin Scholar, I felt so humbled and proud of myself.

### Discussion

Results of the case study reveal that the Martin Scholars program impacts both the career

development and psychosocial wellbeing of participants. More specifically, the data suggests that a holistic program, anchored by mentoring relationships and developmental networks, supports wellbeing during the college-to-career transition. While case study research, by nature, is isolated in scope but transferable in concept, the value of this research is to provide a framework for other undergraduate and graduate mentoring programs to consider.

The case study investigation was designed to identify the impact of the Martin Scholars program as well as the features of the program that contribute most to that impact. Regarding program impact, participants indicated that the program provides a space for identity exploration. Participants also suggested that the program offers three different types of industry connection that help facilitate identity exploration: networking, privileged association, and professional relationship. These types of connection appear to be the crux of the Martin Scholars experience, and the source of greatest impact.

It is also important to highlight the impact of the peer community on participant experience. Consistent with Kram and Higgins' (2009) suggestion that peers play a significant role as a part of a development network, the findings of the present study reveal that the Martin Scholar community provides several outcomes pertinent to participant wellbeing: affiliation and pride, belonging and friendship, as well as understanding and support. Scholars' report feeling "accomplished" and "recognized" when they are nominated or selected for the program, and state that it allowed them to connect with "like-minded" students. They describe being a part of an "elite" group of "motivated" students. Similarly, they describe their connections to one another as "life-long friendships" and "something bigger" than a typical club or group. They also turn to one another for support and in times of challenge such as job interviews, difficult projects, or not landing their dream job. This is consistent with extant research suggesting "peers can learn from one another in one-on-one and group settings where complementary knowledge and skills, as well as shared challenges, can be a source of learning and problem-solving for all present" (Kram & Higgins, 2009, pg.2).

Interestingly, when it comes to program features, activities that provide scholars exposure and access to the careers they can pursue seem to carry the greatest impact on career development. For example, local site visits and spring break trips are cited as impactful to career development outcomes. These visits are designed to give students behind-the-scenes exposure across a variety of industries and include guided tours, roundtable conversations with communication professionals, and Q&A sessions. Hosts for the visits vary from CEO's and CCOs to entry-level employees who share candid insights and help students envision potential career trajectories. The average number of site visits per year is 28,

with the visits split between agencies (e.g. APCO, Ketchum), corporations (e.g. Home Depot, Nestle), media outlets (e.g. CNN, NPR) and nonprofits, government offices, and associations (e.g. Consumer Bankers Association, Capitol Hill).

Similarly, psychosocial support outcomes appear to be strongly impacted by relationships with program leadership, relationships with peers, and finally, relationships with formal mentors. Students in the program build the most significant relationships with the founder of the program through class sessions, site visits, networking events, and one-on-one meetings where they develop a career strategy, review strengths and opportunities, and make connections to personal contacts from his network. Scholars also develop connections with the other faculty members who accompany them on both fall and spring break trips and attend networking events. While relationships with program leaders are a strong source of support, most Scholars report that the most significant relationships are with their peers in the program. Finally, each Scholar is matched with a mentor who meets with them regularly (every 3-6 weeks) either in person or virtually.

These mentors provide individualized support, offering guidance on career planning, networking, and the transition from college to the professional world. Conversations often center around the student's goals, interests, challenges, and values, creating space for reflection, skill-building, and confidence development.

### **Future Research**

Based on the case research, recommendations for further research and revised practices for the program have been considered and include the following:

- Longitudinal study would allow the research team to examine the impact of the program over time, as well as consider programming that would support scholars beyond their time in the program for sustained impact.
- Similarly, program activities that focus on meaningful connection with program alumni appear to be an opportunity for sustained engagement and ongoing scholar support.
- Emotional preparedness for life after college appears to be an area of opportunity for the Martin Scholars program. Again, exploring this survey item through qualitative follow-up will allow the research team to better understand the opportunity, explore best practices for social-emotional learning (SEL), and support students through meaningful activities.
- Finally, while program leadership completes exit interviews and surveys regarding scholar experience throughout the program, adding a pre- and post-assessment would allow a deeper understanding of the impact of the program on individual students.

As a case that connects developmental mentoring networks to the wellbeing of emerging adults, this in-depth assessment of

the Martin Scholars program shares a model of mentoring support that contributes to both career development and psychosocial outcomes, resulting in greater wellbeing during a time of significant transition.

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