Project Summary

For my final project as a Service Scholar, I wanted to be able to work with the Hispanic community in Macon, as being a Spanish minor here at Mercer has given me a particular interest in helping this community. While the Macon Hispanic community is not particularly large at the current time, the percentage of Hispanic people living in Macon-Bibb County, like the national Hispanic population, will continue to steadily increase (Stucka 2014) in the coming years. As more Hispanic families come to Macon, the problems affecting the Hispanic community become increasingly more relevant to this county. Among other issues, educational disparities are a major concern for the Hispanic community as national test data shows that Hispanic students score significantly lower than white students on standardized tests (NAEP). This education disparity has a negative impact on the overall quality of a person’s life and creates a cycle of poverty. If a person has a low level of educational attainment, they most likely end up with a low-paying job. This decreased salary contributes to the healthcare disparity present between whites and Hispanics (Cardenas & Kerby 2012). In addition, children coming from homes where the parents have a low level of education are more likely to drop out of high school and much less likely to attend college (Schneider et al. 2006). These children then end up with a low level of education and are likely to enter into poverty themselves, and thus the cycle continues to perpetuate itself. Because education has such a great effect on a person’s life, it also has the most potential to change someone’s life. Addressing the educational disparity therefore also means helping to address the other issues of the Hispanic population.

In light of this educational disparity and the negative effects it creates, I decided that I would like to run a tutoring program for seventh and eighth grade Hispanic students in the Bibb
County community. The goal of the program was to help prepare these students for their end-of-grade test called the Georgia Milestone Assessment (GMA). It is especially important for seventh and eighth grade students to do well on the test as this determines if they are ready to progress into high school, which is why the program is designed for these grades. I partnered with Family Advancement Ministries (FAM) in Macon for the project, which has an established presence with the Hispanic community.

The program took place for two hours, twice a week in the office facilities of FAM and started a month before the students began testing for the Georgia Milestone Assessment. By doing practice tests and learning effective test taking strategies, the program’s aim was to help better prepare the students for the test. During each class, the students would take math and English practice tests from published GMA test prep books to help them review concepts in the corresponding sections, and tutors from Mercer’s Spanish language program would check over their answers with them, helping clear up any misunderstandings they had about the material. They also played Jeopardy games that allowed them to practice the material in a more engaging and entertaining manner. For the outcome of the project, three students consistently came for the GMA prep. There were also four elementary school students who started coming for homework help the second week of the program, which was not originally intended to be part of the program. However, the Hispanic coordinator at FAM told me that some parents were interested in bringing their kids for homework help, and after it became apparent that there were more than enough volunteers for the GMA prep program, giving homework help was incorporated into the project as well. The parents of all the students in the program very much appreciated the help that was provided for their children.
Project Evaluation

As stated above, the main purpose of this project was to help better prepare seventh and eighth grade Hispanic students for their end-of-grade Georgia Milestone Assessment. Originally, there were about ten potential students signed up for the class, but only three students came consistently. While the turnout rate for the program was lower than expected, the three students that did consistently show up were able to do many practice problems over the test material. Therefore, while the program did not reach a great number of students, it was able to better prepare the students that did participate. Although not an original aim of the program, it also was able to provide much-needed homework help for four elementary school students. Overall, the project had a beneficial impact on the seven students that it was able to serve.

Success Factors

The most important factors in the success of the program were the people who helped make it possible. The support of FAM was essential to making the project happen. Without the use of their facilities and their help advertising the program, the program would not have been able to happen. FAM also provided an important connection to the Hispanic community in Macon and gave useful input as to the best times and days for the program to take place. The volunteer tutors from Mercer’s Spanish language program also greatly contributed to the success of the program. Without these volunteers, the Hispanic students would not have received the personalized attention necessary to best help them with the practice problems and concept review. Having tutors was also helpful in that each person has their own strengths, and the combination of these strengths helped provide a better overall experience for the students. For
example, I was good at explaining math concepts, but weaker at helping the students understand why an answer for an English question was correct. If I had trouble explaining an English concept, I could always count on one of the other tutors to help make it clearer for the students.

Besides the people who made the program a success, being flexible and willing to adapt the program to the needs of the students helped the program better prepare them for their test. The best example of this was the introduction of math concept reviews before giving the students the math practice tests. When the students were given their math practice test the first day, many of them simply stared at the paper or guessed on most of the questions. In response to being asked if they were having trouble with the test, they said that they could not remember most of the material. I knew the practice tests were not going to help prepare the students if they just guessed on them. I started to doing math concept reviews each class to help refresh the concepts in their minds before giving them the tests so that the students would actually gain something from doing the problems.

While doing the practice tests were an important part of preparing the students, the Jeopardy games were important in that they got the students more involved and engaged in the reviewing the test material. These students had already been in school for seven to eight hours of their day, and I did not want them to feel like they were having to be in school for another two hours of their day. Playing the games lightened the atmosphere of the classes and made the students more energetic about learning and preparing for the test.

**Obstacles and Challenges**

The biggest challenge of the program was getting students to show up. Like the evaluation section reported, there were originally around ten students signed up for the class, but
only three consistently came. A big part of this problem lay in the relatively little promotion time for the program. Unfortunately, the planning process for this project was somewhat rushed, so it did not leave much time to spread the word and advertise the program to the community. If this program is repeated in the future, I would suggest allowing for at least two months of promotion time in order to reach as many students and families as possible.

Another contributing factor to the problem of getting students to come to the program is how busy parents and students are. In order to figure out the best days and times for the program, a parent meeting was held prior to the start of the classes. It was agreed that Mondays and Wednesdays from six to eight pm would be best since students would be out of school and parents would be off work at these times. However, parents and students have many other things going on in their lives, and getting the students to the program on top of everything else they had to juggle was often very hard. Unfortunately, this is a problem for which I do not have a viable solution as parents and students are always going to be busy.

Another obstacle encountered was that, at least concerning the math concepts, the students often acted like they did not recall learning many of the concepts. This could be because they truly have not been taught the material in school or because they were taught it at such a fast pace that they did not really have time to truly understand material. Math concept reviews were added to the classes to help overcome this barrier, but these also took away from the amount of time the students had to do the practice problems. The program was designed to be a review of concepts with which the students were already familiar, and while teaching them the material certainly added to their test preparation, it was difficult to introduce new concepts and get the students comfortable enough with these concepts to start independently doing the practice problems from the prep books in the short amount of time the program ran.
**Future Implications for the Project**

As students in grades three through eight have to take the end-of-grade GMA every year, this project can certainly be repeated in future years. If the project is picked up in future years, there are a few ways in which it can be expanded. First, the inclusion of more grade levels is a possible avenue for expansion. I chose to focus only on seventh and eighth grade students because some of the research I found (mentioned in the project summary section above) said that this time period is particularly difficult for Hispanic students, and I knew that it would be difficult to handle more than two grades in the short amount of time I had to do the program this year. However, future years will hopefully have more time to implement the program, and it would certainly benefit the students in other grade levels to receive preparation help as well.

Another way to add to this program would be covering more test subjects for the eighth-grade students. The program this year only provided help in math and English because, as said before, there was not very much time in which to implement the program this year, and it was apparent that a month-long, twice a week program would be enough time to sufficiently cover only two subjects. However, eighth grade students also test over social studies and science. If preparation in these subjects is incorporated into the project design, I would suggest making the program at least two months long to allow enough time to adequately prepare the students in all four of these subjects.

The interest that the parents expressed in getting homework help for their children leads to another interesting project idea for a homework help program. Most of the time, their child’s homework is not hard, but the language barrier prevents the parents from helping their children. For example, practicing reading at home is extremely important for young children learning to read, but children with parents who only speak Spanish do not get this valuable practice. Helping
children strengthen these essential basic skills will set them up for increased academic success later on in school.

No matter how this project is modified, it important to realize the value of working to help narrow the achievement gap between white and Hispanic students. Not only does it have a positive impact on students’ academic success, but this increased academic success will lead to a better quality of life later. Programs like this also benefit parents just as much as the students. Like any other parents, the parents of these kids want their kids to have a strong educational foundation. They know how important education is, but the language barrier makes it hard for them to help their children, so they are really appreciative of help provided for their children.

**Dissemination Plan**

The results of this project will be distributed to Mercer University’s online digital repository, URSA, so that anyone who wants to continue the program in the future or develop a related program can view the results. What was learned from this project can then hopefully provide some guidance and insight for others wishing to serve their communities in similar ways.
Works Cited


Before leaving for Christmas break, I emailed the Hispanic coordinator at Family Advancement Ministries (FAM) to talk to her about my project idea for a Georgia Milestone Assessment prep class for 7th and 8th grade Hispanic students, and I asked if FAM would be interested in partnering with me on the project. She replied saying that she would love to meet with me to talk about the project, but unfortunately her reply did not come until I had already gone home for break. I told her that I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with her, but that I wouldn’t be back in Macon until early January. We agreed that we would find a day and time to meet once I got back from break. The first day of classes for spring semester, I emailed Luz to tell her that I was back and to see if we could meet soon to talk about the project, and we set a meeting for 1/12/17.

The meeting with Luz went well today. I think that she was a little confused at first about what I wanted to do and thought that I wanted to volunteer with FAM for their English-teaching classes. However, the confusion seemed to be cleared up once I explained who I was, and that I wanted to start a new program with the help of FAM. I explained to her that the goal of the program was to help prepare 7th and 8th grade Hispanic students for their end of grade test, known as the Georgia Milestone Assessment, and how it is especially important for students in these grades to do well on the test because it determines whether they can progress further in their education into high school. Luz said that FAM would like to work with me on the project and that she thought parents would be very interested in the program for their children as well. She said that she would ask around with the Hispanic families at FAM and in the community to see who would be interested in the class, and once she had a general idea of who was interested, we could arrange a meeting with the parents for me to better explain the program.

Today I emailed Luz again, asking if she had received any feedback on interest in the tutoring program. She promptly responded, saying that at the moment she had a potential of 5 students interested in the class. That week, FAM would be starting their learning workshop classes, which meant she would be in direct contact with more of the mothers and would be able to talk to them about the program as well.
Luz contacted me saying that she had 10 potential students for the class, and that it would be good to go ahead and schedule the parent meeting for the class. We scheduled it for Thursday, February 24th at 6 pm in order to allow the parents time to get off work and get to the meeting.

2/23/17

Prior to the parent meeting, I made a brief information sheet for the parents to take home, which explained what the purpose of the class is. During the meeting, I explained who I was went over the information of the handout I gave to each of them. The parents spoke very little English, so I was very thankful that I take Spanish and have gotten to practice it a lot over the past few years. Even so, communication was a little difficult at times when I was unsure about how to correctly phrase something. Fortunately, Luz and one of the parents speak English fairly fluently, so if I was ever unsure as to how to say something, they were able to help me out. This experience showed me that if anyone wants to take over this project next year, it would be best if they had at least the level of Spanish language fluency required by a 300 level Spanish class. At the end of the meeting, we decided on the times for the class, which will be Monday and Wednesday from 6-8 pm.

2/24/17

Today I went to Judy Wilbanks’s office and ordered the prep books for class.

2/27/17

I talked with Dr. Pino about the project today so that he could advertise it to his students and see if any of them would be interested in volunteering to help with the class. He was very supportive of the project and told me that he would send an email out to his class with the volunteer promotion sheet I made in order to help me get volunteers. *ideas for improvement*

2/29/17

I spoke with both sections of Spanish 302 today, telling them about my project and asking for volunteers. I was afraid that not many people would put their name down on the interest form since they would be giving up at least two hours out of their week to volunteer. However, quite a few people signed the forms. Some people seemed nervous about having to help the students with math problems and they don’t see math as their strong suit, but I assured them that they would have the answer keys available to them the whole time.

3/6/17-3/12/17

Over spring break, I have set up a SignUpGenius for the volunteers to sign up on, and I already have at least four people for each class day, which is the goal I was shooting for. I have also been going through the prep books for each grade and subject. The math books for each grade are conveniently separated into four sections, and as there are four weeks of the class, I will be focusing on one math topic each week. The practice tests in the books have plenty of problems, so
I have been going through and grouping the problems into each of the four sections. I have also been making games like Jeopardy for the students to play once they have finished with the practice tests in order to try and make the class a little more entertaining while still making them review important concepts.

3/13/17

The first class went well, although only 3 of the 13 students who were signed up for the class actually showed up. Some of the parents did call to say that they would not be able to make it for this class but will bring their kids to the next, so hopefully next class will be a little more populated. All of the volunteers showed up, which was great, although they outnumbered the students by about a 2:1 ratio. The 7th and 8th graders were placed in separate rooms, and I divided up the tutors between the two grades. Since I am not doing a review section for the English practice tests, I went ahead and got the 7th graders started on their 10 English practice questions for the class. While they were doing that, I did a short little review with the eighth graders over the concepts the problems they would be doing that day covered, and then they started the math problems. Once each grade was finished with the practice problems, the tutors went over the correct answers and explanations with the students. Then the eighth graders did English and the seventh graders switched to math until the class ended. The tutors were really good at helping the students to understand why answers were wrong and right. The students were not very enthusiastic about being there and were reluctant to participate, but I am hoping that once they get used to coming to the class they’ll start to participate more willingly.

3/15/17

Only the same 3 students from last time came to the class again tonight, but it was still a good class. The parents of the other kids who signed up for the class were contacted prior to the class to remind them about it, and many said their kids would be coming, but only the three from before ended up coming. I know that parents and kids must have a lot of other things in their schedules, so this might be part of the low attendance problem. The class structure was pretty much just the same as last time, except that the students participated much more when the tutors and I asked them questions during the review sections and seemed to make more of an effort with the practice tests. The eighth graders also had time to play Jeopardy, which they seemed to really enjoy.

3/20/17

Last week, Luz told me that some parents had asked about getting homework help for their elementary school kids. Because so few students had been coming to the class so far and I had so many tutors, I told her to tell the parents that they could bring their kids for homework help. Four elementary age kids came for the homework help, along with the two seventh graders that came last week. The eighth grader who came last week didn’t come today. We ended up having the perfect number of tutors. Each of the elementary kids had a tutor, which was helpful since they were all working on different assignments, and then there were two tutors for the seventh graders. The seventh graders are gradually becoming a little more outspoken, which is helpful in figuring out what they really need help with and what they understand better. The parents of the elementary schoolers were extremely appreciative of the help that we were able to give their kids. As the
research I did preceding the project shows, Hispanic parents place a high priority on education. However, as is the case for the parents of the children that came today, they can’t help their kids with their homework because they don’t speak English and therefore can’t understand what the assignments are asking. They want to help their kids succeed but have trouble because of the language barrier, and I think this is why they were so excited about the help we were giving to their children.

3/22/17

Wednesday’s class was pretty much just the same as Monday’s. The same four kids came for homework help and the two seventh graders came as well. The eighth grader did not show up again, which is disappointing. When I asked why she wasn’t coming again, they told me that she was too busy this week, but that she would try to come next week. I am also starting to run into a problem with volunteers, as people as signing up to help but aren’t showing up. We had just enough tutors for this class, and I am worried that if this pattern continues we won’t have enough next Wednesday. I have sent out an email asking for more Wednesday volunteers reminded people that if they sign up but end up not being able to go to please let me know so that I can try to find other tutors. However, the tutors who do show up are excellent in the creative ways they come up with to explain problem concepts to the students to better help them learn.

3/27/17

Class was pretty much just the same as the last one. The two seventh graders came, as well as three kids for homework help. Unfortunately, the eighth grader has not returned. The mother of the three kids who came for homework help said that they seem excited to come here and work with the tutors, which is encouraging.

3/29/17

I canceled the class today due to the inclement weather that Macon-Bibb was predicted to have. This isn’t a decision that I would have expected to need to make, and it shows that when running a program like this, it is important to be adaptable to the circumstances that are thrown at you. While you can try to prepare as much as possible for whatever you think will come your way, surprises will always pop up, and the best way to deal with them is being flexible.

4/3/17

Class went the same as all the others.

4/5/17

Class went the same as all the others.

4/10/17

This was the last class of the program. The students had a good time playing jeopardy, and at the end I presented them with certificates for completing the program, which was fun. Tomorrow they will begin testing, so all the tutors and I wished them good luck and told them to remember to take their time and have confidence in themselves. Working with these students has shown me how
smart they are, as they are always quick to catch on to the concepts that we go over. However, while they are quick learners, it was a little concerning to see how little of the information they said they remembered learning in school. I designed the course to be like a review and practice of information they had already learned, but most of the time they acted like they had never seen these concepts before. Because of this, it was hard to introduce new material and have them do enough practice to really master them in the short amount of time the program ran for. I’m not sure if they really hadn’t been taught these concepts, which would be a problem of the Bibb County school system, or if they had been taught about them at school but never fully learned them because the schools go through the material so fast and also due to the disadvantages of coming from a Spanish-speaking family. In either case, I think this issue should be carefully thought about if the project is picked up again next year, as it will be an important factor on improvements made to the program.