

# Summary Report: Educational Center for the Arts

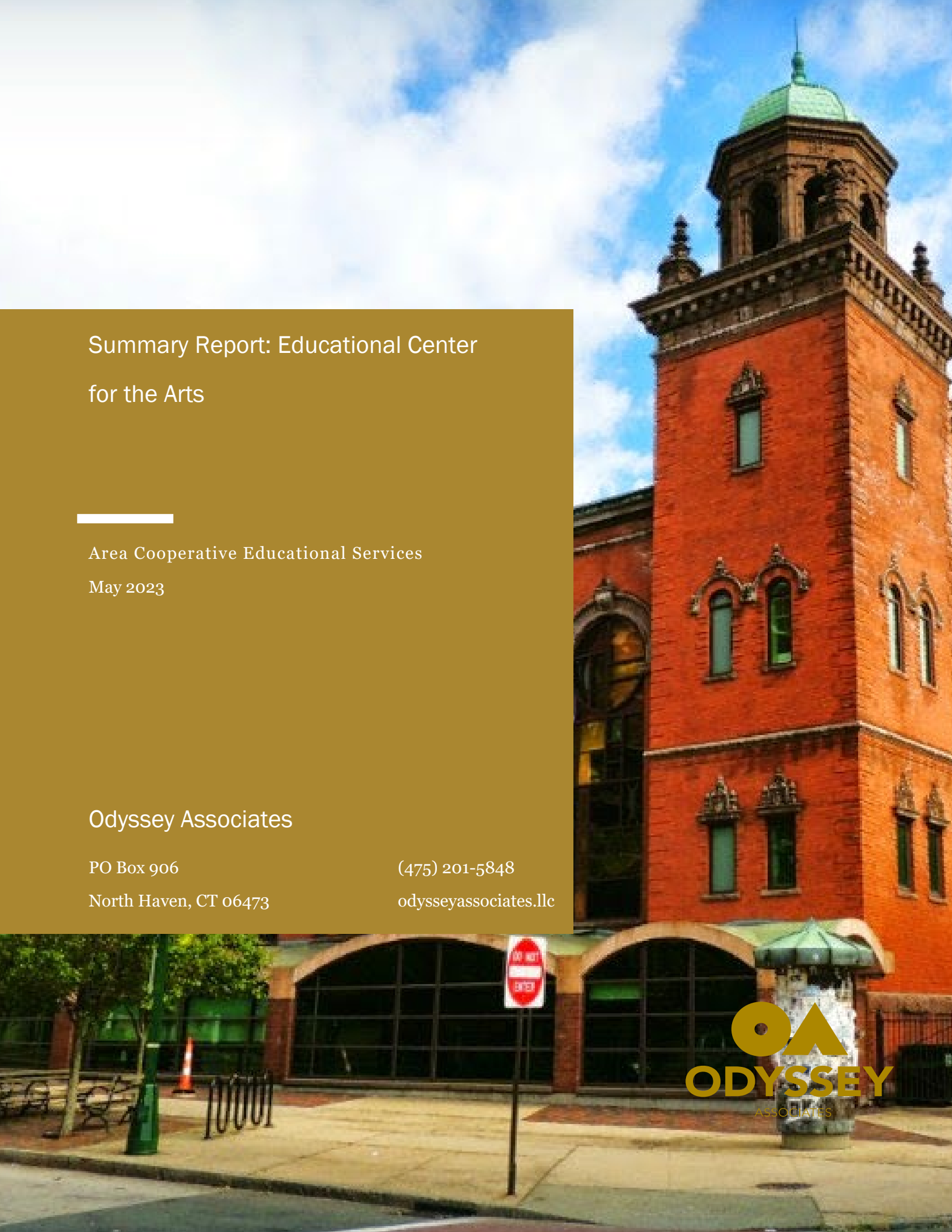
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Area Cooperative Educational Services  
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## Background

In January 2023, Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) retained Odyssey Associates (Odyssey) to conduct a fact finding about the Educational Center for the Arts (ECA), a magnet performing arts high celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. A key motivation for this study has been the gradual decline in enrollment, which has caused growing financial deficits in operating the school.

Odyssey's scope of work consisted of three components:

1. Individual interviews with a number of key stakeholders, focusing on individuals who offered outside perspectives of ECA;
2. Focus groups with students, the department chairs, and leaders of New Haven arts organizations; and
3. Surveys that were administered to parents, students, and the faculty and staff.

This report summarizes the key findings from each task and organizes them as ECA's strengths, challenges, and recommendations moving forward.

## Strengths

Interviewees consistently noted that ECA enjoys an incredible reputation for its high-quality arts instruction. The curriculum at ECA complements the offerings at home districts by providing courses not taught in their schools as well as providing instruction by experienced artists. In addition, the environment was described as accepting and supportive, especially for those students identifying as LBGTQ+.

The survey data supports these assertions. In particular, ECA has very high net promoter scores (NPS). The net promoter score measures how many consumers are actively advocating the products for your business on a scale of -100 to 100. A typical score will fall between 30 to 50. Figure 1 illustrates the high standard of this score, with ECA receiving 93 from parents, 77 among students, and 80 among staff and faculty.

The survey data also reinforces the sense of academic rigor and the positive setting. Figures 2, 3, and 4 show the responses by parents, students, and faculty about the quality of instruction and the supportive environment at ECA.

ECA has an excellent location, with a number of New Haven's leading arts organizations just steps away from the school. While some partnerships already exist, more possibilities exist. After conducting a focus group with some of those leaders, it is clear that there is great interest in expanding relationships with ECA. Some possibilities include ECA students having internships or other mentoring opportunities at organizations, staff members and affiliated artists at these organizations teaching or serving as guest artists at ECA and expanding the sharing of space between all of these institutions.

## Challenges

Yet, despite all of these strengths, ECA faces serious challenges. During the stakeholder interviews, it became apparent that there were a number of circumstances occurring that were eroding the school's relevance to perspective students.

- Some school districts have stopped offering transportation or have extended required classes into the afternoon, making it difficult if not impossible for students to attend ECA and graduate from their home districts. Students talked about how it took a great deal of advocacy at some home districts to make schedule changes. Additionally, now that students in other New Haven magnet schools can no longer attend ECA, the pool of potential applicants from

the City has decreased significantly. Finally, while ECA is respected by those “in the know,” the broader public may not be aware of it, especially in New Haven. This lack of awareness may be impacting its ability to enroll students.

- Some home district teachers are ambivalent about ECA – while it is a great opportunity for their students, it draws some of the most talented ones away from their own classes.
- There is a strong belief that the curriculum is strongly centered around Western European art forms. While there was acknowledgement of the value and importance of these art forms for training, there was interest in learning other non-Western art forms. This deficiency is especially important to students and parents of color, who want to see their backgrounds reflected in the curriculum. In addition, even though ECA’s environment was largely characterized as supportive, interviewees of color stated that they knew that students experienced microaggressions and racial assumptions as a result. One student corroborated this in the survey, writing in response to an open-ended question about what else could be improved, “Not enough discipline for the very few students who are openly racist.” One interviewee went as far to say that he highly recommends ECA to talented high school students of color but warns them about what they might experience in that environment. These sentiments may cause students of color to feel that they may not be welcome or that they belong at the school.
- In Odyssey’s tour of the facility, it was evident that while ADA compliant, the facility would be a difficult one to navigate for faculty or students with visible disabilities.

Survey data corroborates these assertions. Figures 5 and 6 show how students and parents indicated that some sending schools were not as flexible as they could be so that students could earn their graduation requirements.

In looking at the demographic information, in figures 7, 8, and 9, the respondents who shared their racial background are predominately white. This data is consistent with the demographic makeup of New Haven County, which is 74% white, but it is inconsistent with the City of New Haven, which is 40% white.

Recruitment was remarked upon as a concern in interviews, focus groups, and in many open-ended comments on the survey. There were questions about how ACES is recruiting students and whether current tactics were effective.

Morale at ECA is low. Figure 10 illustrates that the net promoter score for ECA as a place to work is 10, which is very below average (a typical range is 30 to 50). Survey comments point to a history of a perceived lack of communication and support of faculty from ACES. Another critical factor in these circumstances is the planned restructuring of department chair positions from full-time to part-time. This change has provoked a strong response among most of the faculty and has created a great deal of uncertainty for them. Additionally, parents and students are also unsatisfied with the restructuring, with a number of parents noting in open-ended comments that they may pull their children out of ECA next year.

### Observations and Recommendations

ECA has a particular challenge. It has a specialized program of a very high standard. While this educational offering has an excellent reputation and is beloved by current parents, students, and faculty, it will have limited appeal because most high school students will not be interested in intensive arts training at the expense of other extracurricular activities and sports or will be willing to

handle some of the other logistical and scheduling complications of attending ECA. Students have to be serious about their chosen disciplines to attend.

In classic competitive strategy, there are two broad approaches: “win the category” and “broaden the base.” Because of ECA’s specialization, it is unlikely to be successful with a “broaden the base” strategy. Instead, it should attempt to win the category as the preeminent secondary school for the arts in the State of Connecticut. To win this category, Odyssey recommends four areas of focus:

1. Adjustments in their offerings to enrich opportunities for current students and attract more students, but staying within the competitive category of college-level arts training;
2. Recalibration of recruitment tactics to maximize exposure to prospective students;
3. Development of a fundraising strategy to increase revenue; and
4. Improve the working environment to lift faculty morale and build a better relationship between management and staff.

### Programming

- Over the long-term, ACES should consider expanding ECA’s programs in adjacent artistic areas, such as film and technical theatre, to complement the current offerings at the school. This solution is not short-term, as the organization will need to make the appropriate investments in equipment, real estate, curriculum development, and faculty to start such programs.
- ACES and ECA should consider opportunities for internships to broaden students’ education, build relationships with New Haven organizations, and provide work experience. One possibility is to schedule students with internships for the full academic year on Fridays, when there are no ECA classes. Alternately, students could do internships for the final six weeks of the year, similar to what some area high schools do for graduating seniors.
- While students and faculty expressed in the surveys that all kinds of artistic genres and artists are taught, many key stakeholders felt that the instruction is mostly rooted in Western European traditions. A school-wide review of the curriculum would be useful in determining where course offerings could be more culturally responsive.
- Electives or simply greater course selection is of interest to a number of current students. This addition to the curriculum could also be useful in recruiting new students. As an example, some students do not enroll in ECA because they would miss out on participating in a produced musical. Perhaps there could be a cross-disciplinary musical theatre elective that could attract new students and also be an exciting opportunity for current ones.

### Recruitment Tactics

- ACES should identify and develop ongoing relationships with regional middle schools that can consistently send students to ECA. Based on current enrollment, focus groups, and leadership interviews, ACES might consider focusing on the following districts:
  - Amity Regional School District
  - Branford
  - Hamden
  - Madison
  - Milford
  - New Haven (especially Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School)
  - North Haven

- Wallingford

In addition, ACES might also consider expanding the relationship of Wintergreen as a feeder school, which has the added advantage of being an arts magnet primary school managed by ACES, and Atlas, an arts-based middle school program located across the street at the Neighborhood Music School. If ACES can focus on drawing 80% of its students from these 10 districts, it could create a more dependable pipeline of matriculating students.

- Along these lines, ACES should expand its recruitment with an annual tour schedule to present at all of these districts each fall, followed by an open house for interested students and parents in January of each year (to coincide with the New Haven interdistrict magnet schools' recruitment effort). This will help increase the probability of reaching students who might enroll in ECA.
- ACES should re-evaluate its media mix on marketing ECA to prospective students, perhaps considering moving dollars spent on outdoor advertising and television to other forms of marketing such as direct mail or digital advertising.
- ACES should expand ways to make the work of ECA students more accessible, including by opening performances to the public and performing at events outside of the school's facilities, to make ECA more visible and provide students with more performance and exhibition opportunities.
- ACES might consider expanding the opportunities to rent Arts Hall and the Little Theatre, similar to Coop High School by making the performance facilities available for New Haven organizations to open up ECA to the community and build the school's visibility. More rentals may require additional staffing, and if that is not possible, ACES might consider prioritizing those rentals that will attract more potential students and their families to the facility.
- To ensure that the application process is equitable, ACES should consider evaluating recruitment procedures and criteria. A fresh look at this process will help ACES determine whether admissions are fair to students of all socio-economic backgrounds.
- During the interviews and focus groups, it became evident that there is a misunderstanding about "seats" for ECA. Most parents and students think that school districts have a limited number of seats to send students to ECA. However, Connecticut's "open choice" law requires that districts accommodate students who are accepted into ECA and wish to enroll. Educating students and parents about this opportunity during orientation sessions, as well as providing advocacy support when they receive pushback from the district, will be critical for ECA's success.
- ECA should take a fresh look at its recruitment messaging, partly to make sure that it is fully emphasizes its competitive strengths of outstanding arts training, incredible individual mentorship of students, and a challenging yet nurturing environment.

### Fundraising

- Given the excellent net promoter scores by parents, students, and faculty, a concerted development effort would likely be successful. ACES should develop a fundraising plan focused on supporting ECA.
- Of particular importance would be conducting at least two fundraising appeals – one in the spring, just before graduation, and one at the end of the calendar year, when most people are considering charitable donations.

- A special event, such as a benefit performance for ECA, might also be considered to raise money for the school, but these endeavors tend to be highly labor intensive.
- The hiring of a fundraising professional specifically focused on ECA could yield an excellent return for the school.

### Human Resources

- The surveys, which were administered shortly after the announcement of the restructuring of department chair positions, indicate that faculty morale is damaged and confidence in the management of ECA is low. The incoming principal will have a singular role to play in resetting the relationship between ACES and the ECA faculty. Some recommended actions include:
  - Meeting with ECA faculty on a regular basis and making sure that their concerns are heard by ACES administration.
  - Working with both ACES administration and ECA faculty to create alignment about the school and the best strategic direction moving forward.
  - Making sure that ECA faculty have the resources needed to be successful, including having appropriate supplies and adequate training on applications such as Powerschool.
  - Collaborating with ACES administration and current faculty to make sure that upcoming real estate investments enhance current instruction as well as provide an opportunity to create new programs in adjacent art forms.
- As indicated by the surveys, the ethnic makeup of the faculty is very homogenous. Odyssey encourages the recruitment and retention of guest artists and faculty of color to have a teaching community more representative of New Haven.
- While ECA is an inclusive community in many ways, more work can be done to make the school more welcoming to students of color. ACES should consider expanding DEI initiatives and best practices through working group(s) designated with implementing these initiatives.

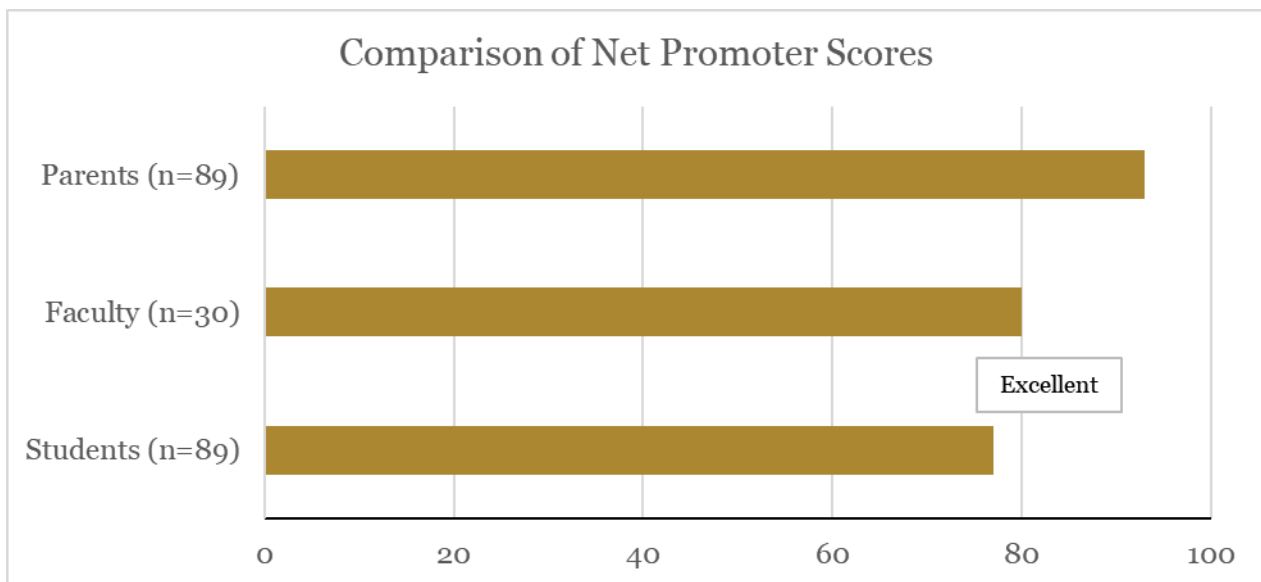


Figure 1: Comparison of Net Promoter Scores

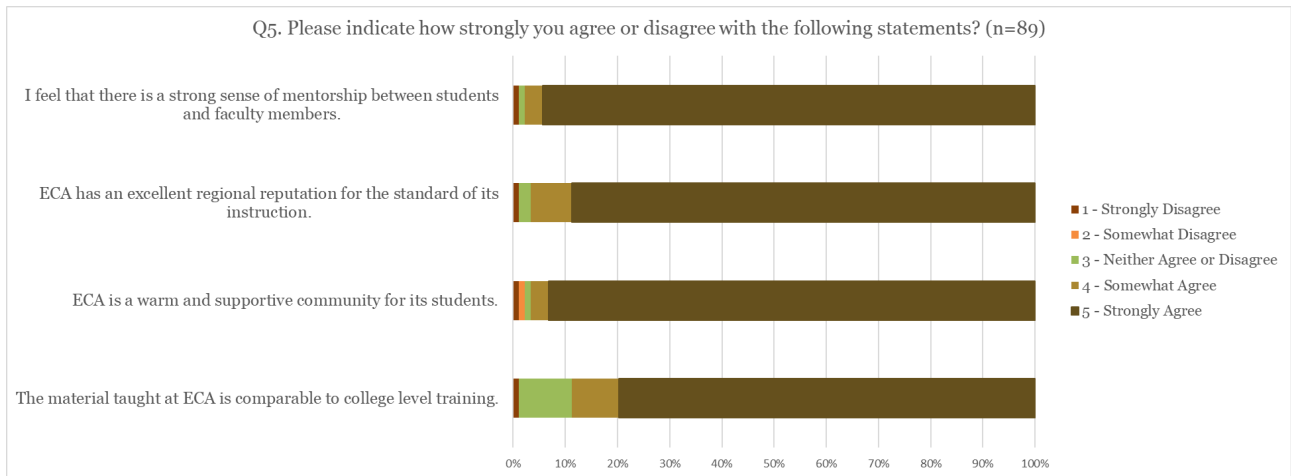


Figure 2: Parents Agreement or Disagreement on Instruction and Environment

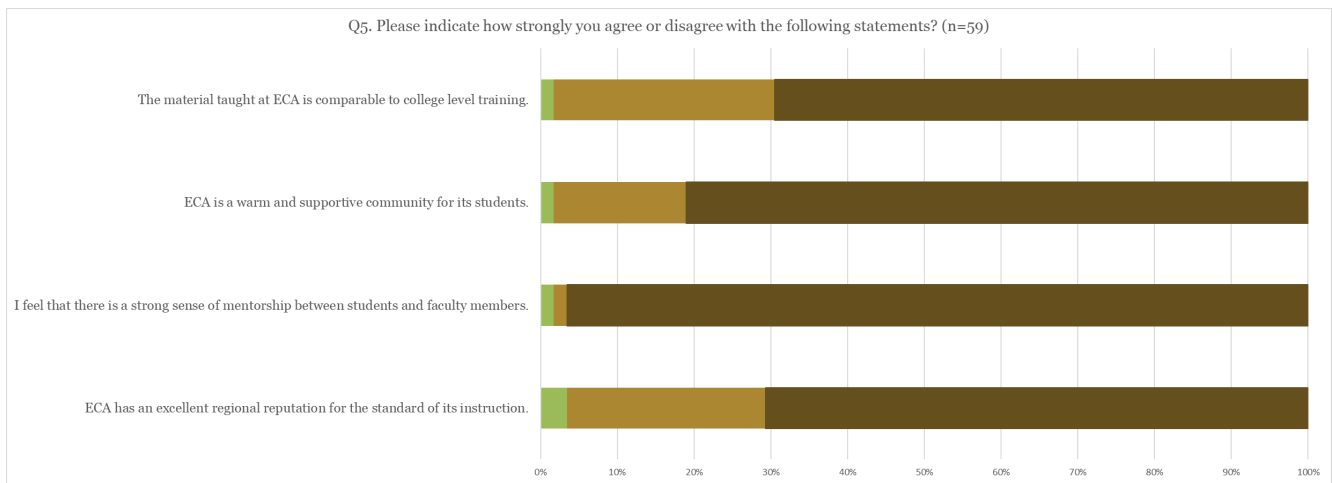


Figure 3: Students Agreement or Disagreement on Instruction and Environment

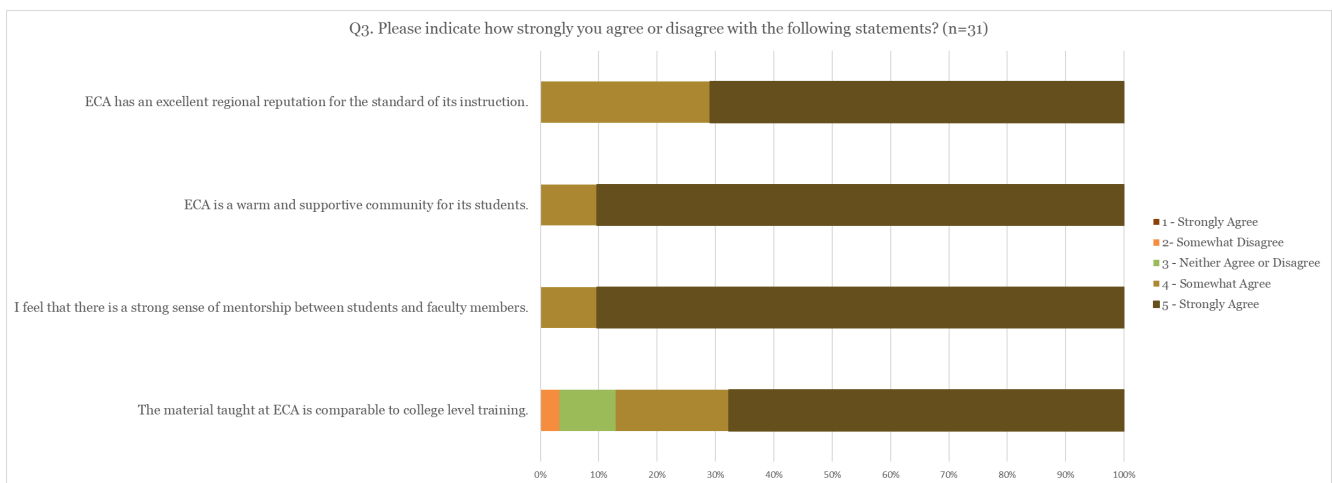


Figure 4: Faculty Agreement or Disagreement on Instruction and Environment



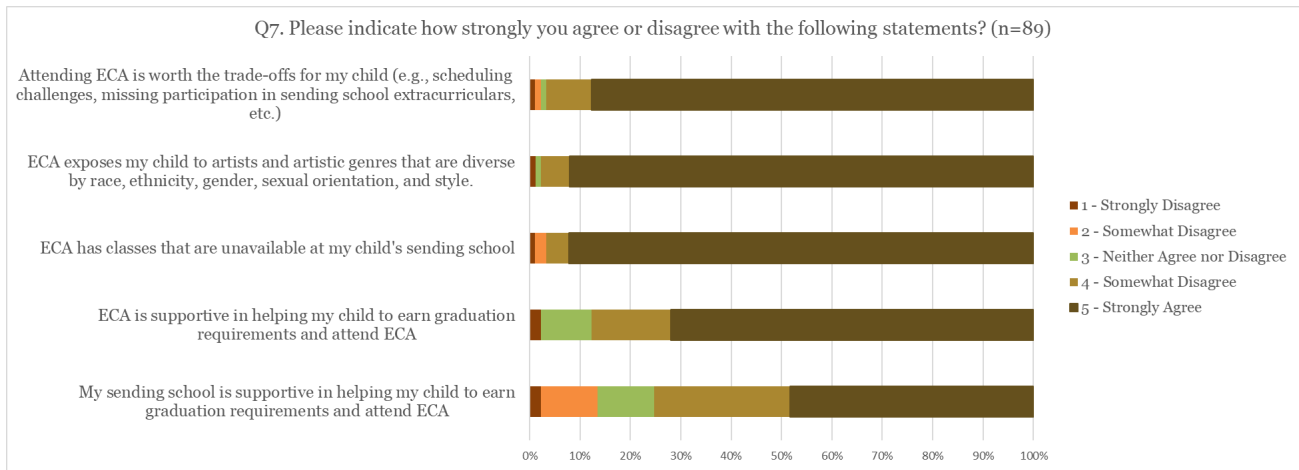


Figure 5: Parents Responses Noting Some Difficulty with Support From Sending Schools

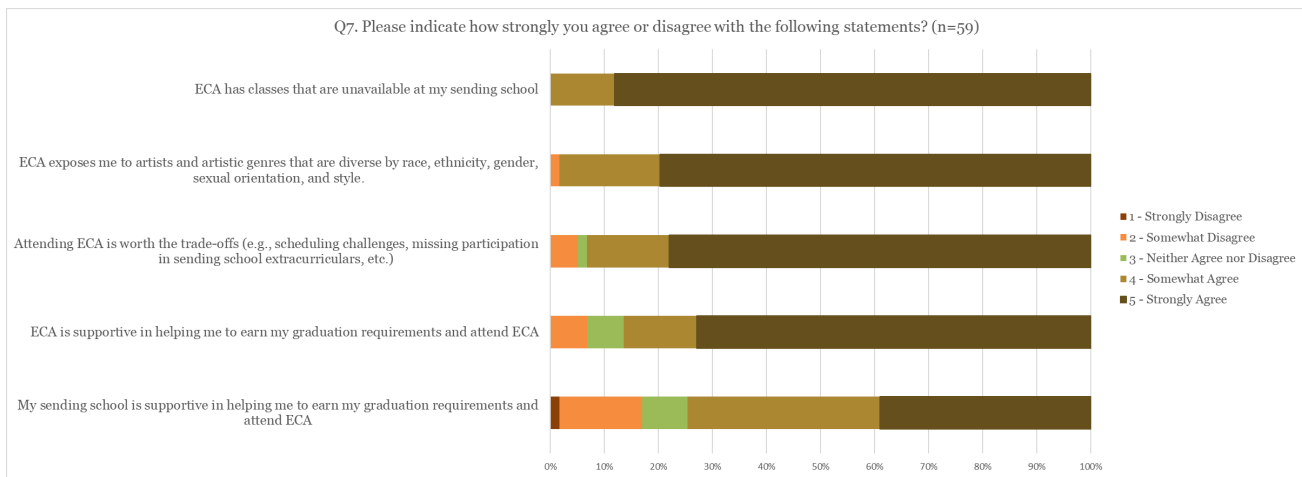


Figure 6: Students Responses Noting Some Difficulty with Support From Sending Schools

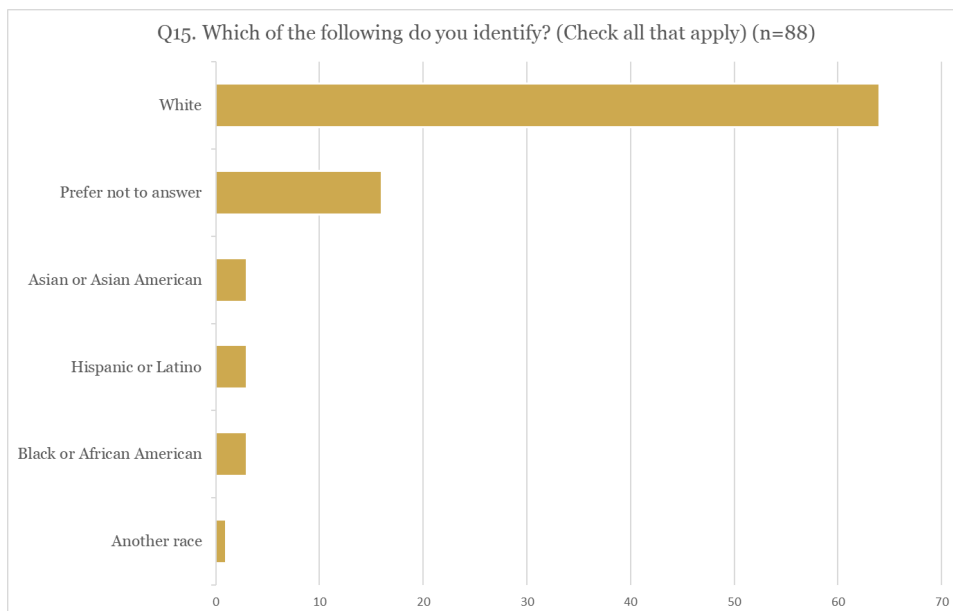


Figure 7: Racial Background of Parent Survey Respondents



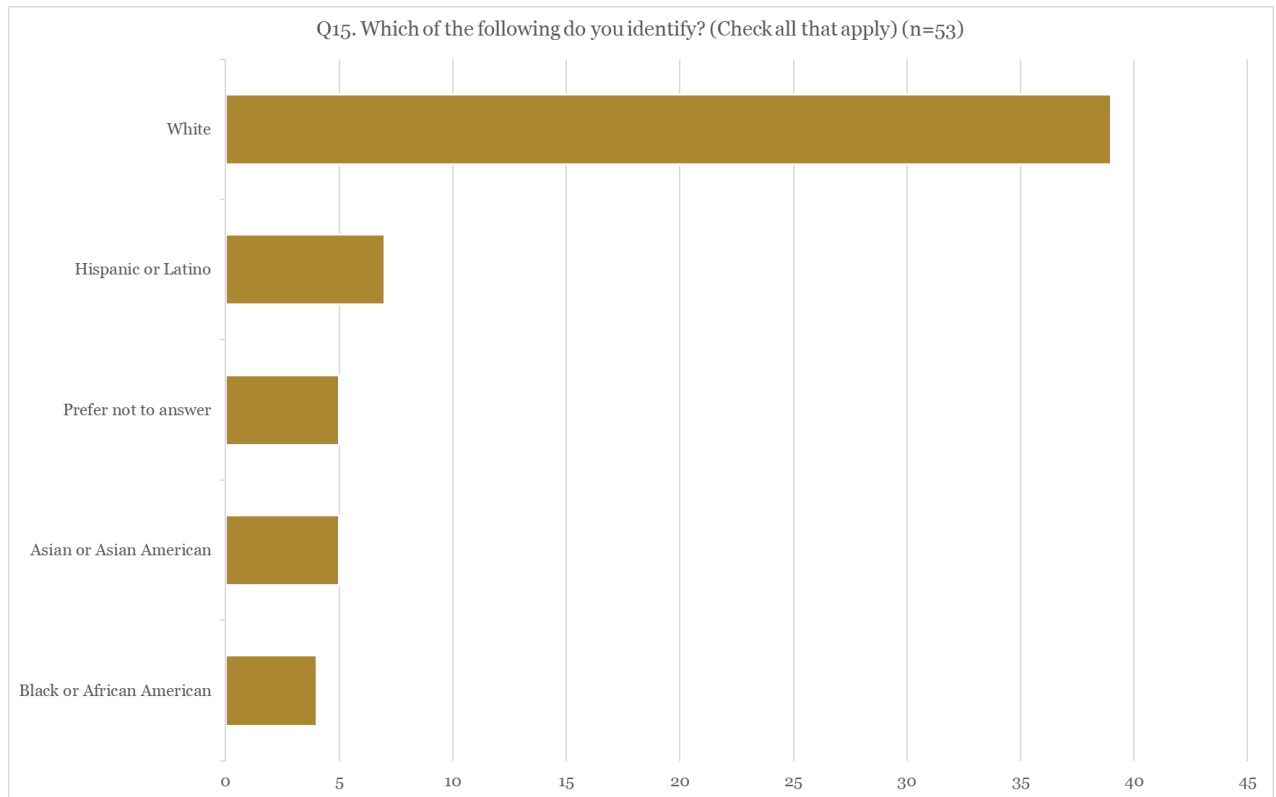


Figure 8: Racial Background of Student Survey Respondents

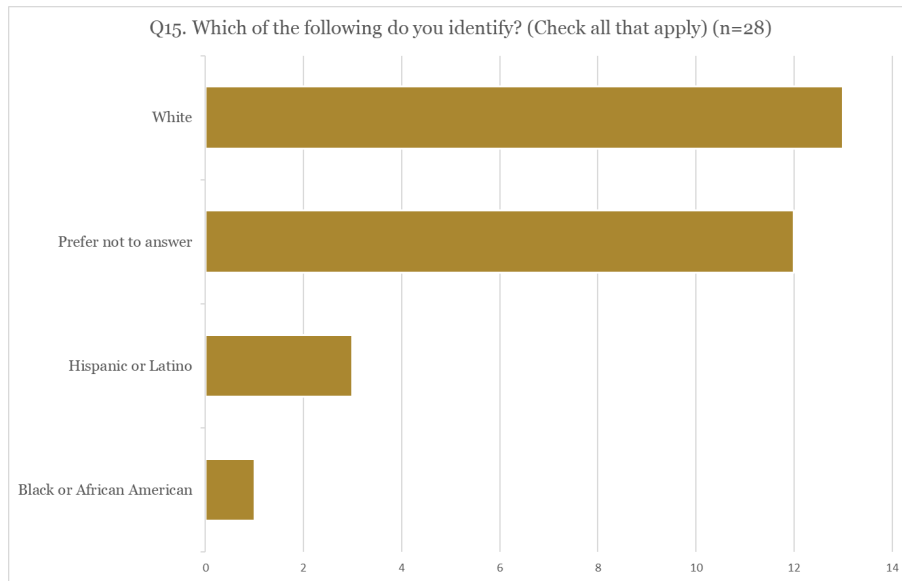


Figure 9: Racial Background of Faculty Survey Respondents

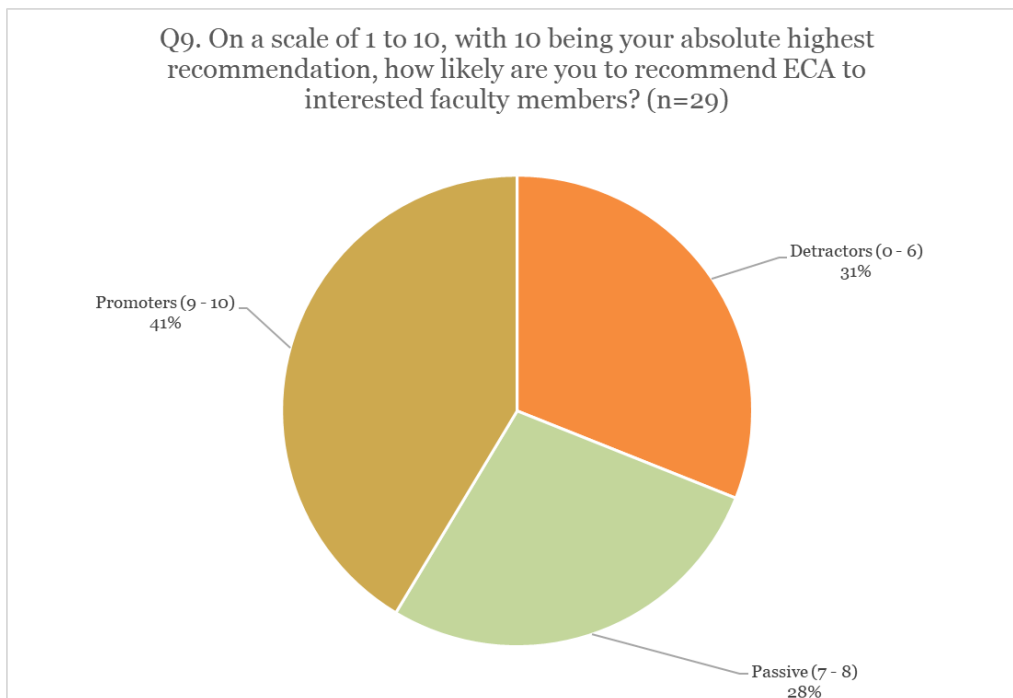


Figure 10: Faculty Net Promoter Score Breakdown to Other Faculty Members