The Research Alliance for
New York City Schools

Bringing Together Mentoring, Technology, and Whole-School Reform:
A First Look at the iMentor College Ready Program

Lisa Merrill
Nina Siman
Suzanne Wulach
David Kang

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NYU | STEINHARDT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Find this report online at http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/publications/imentor_first_look

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Graduating college has become the new benchmark for educational success, widely viewed as a gateway to economic stability and overall well-being. Yet, relatively few students are leaving high school well prepared for college. In New York City, less than a quarter of on-time high school graduates go on to earn an Associate's or Bachelor's degree within four years.[i] Nationally, research shows that low-income students are much less likely than their higher-income counterparts to complete college: Students from families in the bottom income quartile are six times less likely to obtain a four-year degree than students whose families are in the top quartile.[ii]

In response to these low levels of college readiness, policymakers have promoted many reforms aimed at improving students' *academic* preparation, most notably the introduction of the Common Core State Standards. However, there has been much less attention paid to *non-academic* skills and knowledge that students need to be prepared for college. These include, for example, self-advocacy and the ability to persist and overcome obstacles when trying to accomplish a task. Without these skills, even students with solid academic preparation may fail to reach or succeed in college.[iii]

iMentor's College Ready Program is a unique approach that combines elements of school-based mentoring, whole school reform, and technology in an effort to help students develop the full suite of knowledge, behaviors, and skills they need to complete high school and enroll and thrive in college. iMentor partners with high schools that serve low-income students, and aims to engage every student at the school, from 9th grade through their high school graduation. Each student is matched with a college-educated mentor; students also attend weekly classes structured around iMentor's College Ready curriculum and taught by iMentor staff.

While mentoring is a well-established strategy to improve students' outcomes, iMentor's approach is distinctive for several reasons: First, few mentoring programs have embraced technology as fully as iMentor, where email is the main form of contact between students and their mentors. Second, iMentor attempts to serve *all* students at the school and provides a weekly class as a regular part of students' school schedules—few other mentoring programs are so fully integrated into the schools in which they work. Third, iMentor's focus on college readiness, including its College Ready curriculum, is unusual. In iMentor's model, mentors not only

provide students with friendship and support, but also serve as de facto college readiness coaches. The program's designers believe that the combination of a strong mentoring relationship and exposure to the iMentor curriculum will help students be better prepared to reach and succeed in college.

To learn more about the efficacy of iMentor's approach, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is conducting a mixed-methods evaluation of the College Ready Program in eight New York City high schools. With support from the Social Innovation Fund, the Research Alliance is examining iMentor's roll-out and implementation in these schools, as well as its impact on a range of outcomes related to students' preparation for college. In each school, we are following two cohorts of entering 9th graders who have the opportunity to participate in iMentor, totaling approximately 1,600 students. This summary highlights key findings from the first year of implementation across the eight schools. For more details, see our full report, *Bringing Together Mentoring, Technology, and Whole-School Reform: A First Look at the iMentor College Ready Program*.

This work is intended to inform and strengthen iMentor's ongoing implementation and development. In the long run, we believe the evaluation will provide useful insights not only for iMentor, but also for other mentoring and college-readiness programs.

The iMentor College Ready Program

iMentor's College Ready Program uses volunteer, college-educated mentors and school-based staff to deliver an intensive four-year intervention. The program has four central elements:

1. A whole school model, which aims to engage all incoming 9th graders for their full high school careers and integrate the program fully into the life of the school;
2. A college-readiness curriculum taught in weekly classes and reinforced during monthly events;
3. A "blended" approach to developing relationships between each student and his or her mentor—involving both email and face-to-face meetings; and
4. A pair support strategy based on a case-management model for tracking mentee-mentor relationship development.

Much of the program is delivered by an iMentor Program Coordinator (PC)—a trained college counselor who is responsible for enrolling students, matching

students with mentors, teaching the weekly class, organizing events, and supporting mentoring pairs.

During each weekly class, PCs present material related to a specific skill, and students are prompted to write an email to their mentor on that topic. Mentors also respond to their mentee's emails following a structured iMentor protocol. Each unit of the iMentor curriculum culminates with an event that reinforces the theme and also allows students and mentors to spend time together in person and develop their relationship.

How was iMentor implemented during the first year?

We examined each of iMentor's four core program elements using a variety of data sources, including extensive iMentor program data (e.g., information about student/mentor matches, iMentor classes and events, and logs of student and mentor emails). We used these data to assess how intensively students may have experienced the iMentor program and to compare students' experiences with a series of implementation benchmarks that iMentor developed. We also interviewed PCs, principals, teachers, and mentors in three schools to learn about specific challenges and successes during the first year of implementation.

Overall, we found that the implementation of iMentor varied substantially across schools, as some schools implemented the major elements of the iMentor College Ready program as designed, while others did not. Table ES-1 summarizes the extent to which each school met key programmatic benchmarks established by iMentor for three of the major program elements.[iv] A check-plus (✓+) signifies that the school

Table ES-1: Implementation Varied Across Schools

Element:	Whole School Model	Curriculum	Mentee-Mentor Relationship Development	
Measure:	Student Participation	Number of Classes	Email Frequency	Event Attendance
School				
Ginkgo	✓	✓+	✓+	✓+
Fig	✓	✓+	✓+	✓
Redwood	✓	✓+	✗	✓
Maple	✓	✓+	✓	✗
Cherry Blossom	✗	✗	✗	✗
Oak	✗	✓	✓	✗
Sequoia	✓	✓	✓+	✗
Palm	✓	✓+	✓+	✓

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on iMentor programmatic data.
Note: For more information about iMentor's benchmarks and implementation see pp. 29-31 in the full report. At the time of writing, iMentor did not have a measurable benchmark for pair support. Each school is represented with a pseudonym to keep its identity confidential.

met iMentor's expectations—achieving "high fidelity to the model"—on a particular program element. A check (✔) signifies that the school did not meet the benchmark for a program element, but was approaching it, achieving "moderate fidelity" to the iMentor model. An x (✗) signifies that the school did not meet iMentor's expectations for how a particular program element should be implemented. To see the details of the fidelity measures for each element, please see pages 29-31 in the full report.

The figure shows that Gingko, Fig, and Palm implemented all measured program elements with fidelity.[v] Redwood, Maple, and Sequoia implemented all but one element with fidelity. Yet, Cherry Blossom did not meet iMentor's expectations for any of the major program elements. This school started the program late, which certainly affected its ability to meet the benchmarks for participation, number of events, and number of classes.

The figure also demonstrates that the event attendance benchmark was the most difficult for schools to meet: Only one school achieved high fidelity for this program element, and half the schools in the study did not meet iMentor's basic expectations for event attendance, meaning many mentors and mentees spent less time together than planned. Interestingly, this did not seem to dampen the development of relationships between mentees and mentors. In a survey of iMentor students conducted at the end of the first year of implementation, 85 percent reported feeling "somewhat close" or "very close" to their mentor. These measures were fairly consistent across all schools—and are similar to the average ratings seen in other mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters.[vi]

Across the eight evaluation schools, we found generally strong structures in place to support mentoring pairs, which may help explain students' perceptions of closeness. PCs employ a case management model, in which they assess mentors' and students' needs and then provide the appropriate support. We found that PCs used systems to keep in close contact with mentors and track how well students and mentors were interacting. These included making calls to mentors throughout the year, having "mentor huddles" at monthly events, holding office hours for students, and creating focus lists and action plans for mentoring pairs in need of extra support. In a survey, mentors reported that they were largely satisfied with this guidance and support and felt close to their mentees.[vii]

Our interviews pointed to a number of strategies that might help strengthen iMentor's implementation in coming years. iMentor could probably better prepare its staff for the realities they face in schools. For instance, while six of the eight schools reached iMentor's benchmark for student participation (i.e., matching 75 percent of 9th graders with a mentor by December), PCs reported that they were surprised by the amount of time and effort required to meet those goals. PCs may benefit from additional support around recruiting students and obtaining permission for them to participate in the program.

In addition, according to the PCs, teachers, and principals we spoke with, the quality of instruction in iMentor classes varied. Some PCs were viewed as competent and capable instructors, with strong classroom management, lesson planning, and presentation skills, while other struggled to run their classes effectively. iMentor is already working to address this issue, by hiring more PCs with classroom experience, developing a rubric to assess the quality of PC instruction, and bringing in experienced educators to visit classrooms and provide recommendations to PCs about how to improve their teaching.

Lastly, iMentor could work with PCs to increase event attendance. At many schools, iMentor events were not well attended during this first year of implementation—which may be due, at least in part, to their timing. The events typically begin three hours after the end of the school day, to accommodate mentors' schedules, but this time appears to be challenging for students. iMentor may want to convene school staff, parents and students to brainstorm solutions to this problem and/or adjust expectations for how often students and mentors will attend events.

What were the effects of iMentor after one year of implementation?

In 9th grade, iMentor aims to help students improve their relationships with adults, increase their college aspirations, and learn about the key "non-cognitive skills" targeted in the College Ready curriculum. The hope is that 9th grade will provide a foundation for the rest of high school and that cumulative gains in these areas will prepare students to graduate high school and enroll and be successful in college. While it is clearly too soon to judge whether iMentor is accomplishing all of these goals, it is possible that outcomes related to the 9th grade curriculum could show an effect after just one year. We examined the program's early impact on a range of academic and non-academic outcomes, drawing on student surveys and

administrative records to compare iMentor students with a group of similar students who did not have access to iMentor. (See the full report for information about our methods.)

We measured iMentor's effect on 12 student outcomes. After one year, we found that iMentor had a small[viii] but statistically significant positive effect on several measures related to students' relationships with adults and their aspirations for college and a career. Specifically, iMentor students scored higher than comparison students on measures of:

- *Interpersonal Support*, which assesses how well students feel they are supported by the adults in their life;[ix]

- *Future planning*, which assesses how much students talk to adults about college, their future goals, and specific activities related to those goals;[x]

- *College aspirations*, which measures how much education students want to achieve, think they will achieve, and believe they need to achieve; and

- *Career planning*, which assesses the extent to which students have thought about and explored future career options.

We also examined eight other outcomes, including five non-cognitive outcomes (perseverance, growth mindset, hope and sense of optimism, self-advocacy, and social capital), grade point average (GPA), chronic absenteeism,[xi] and the percent of students on track for graduation with a Regents diploma at the end of 9th grade.[xii] We did not find statistically significant effects in any of these areas.

It is important to keep in mind the preliminary nature of these results. Many programs encounter start-up challenges that impede their effectiveness during the first year of implementation. Moreover, the iMentor College Ready Program is a four-year intervention, and we are currently analyzing effects after just one year (i.e., students' 9th grade year). Furthermore, this report analyzes data from only the first of two cohorts of entering 9th graders from each school that will ultimately be involved in our study; data from the second cohort was not yet available at the time of writing, but will be included in future reports.

Conclusion

It is promising that, across schools, iMentor successfully recruited a large proportion of students to participate in mentoring and that students generally reported feeling close to their mentors at the end of the 9th grade year. Given these

results, it is not surprising that iMentor had a positive effect on student perceptions of adult support.

iMentor's effects on measures of students' aspirations are also well aligned with the iMentor curriculum and program, which encourages students to begin thinking about and planning for their future careers and college in 9th grade. The fact that there was some movement on these variables is an encouraging sign that the program is influencing how students think about themselves and their futures.

On the other hand, we found no effects on students' GPA, attendance, or on-track status, nor on the five non-cognitive skills and dispositions that we measured (e.g., perseverance, optimism, etc.). It may be that these non-cognitive outcomes relate to more deeply ingrained attitudes that are harder to affect with just one year of programming.

Our study also suggested a number of areas where the implementation of the College Ready program could be strengthened in future years. iMentor has already taken steps in this direction—for example, by focusing on the quality of instruction in the iMentor classes.

It is important to note that this report presents results for the entire cohort of 9th graders who had access to the first year of iMentor in the evaluation schools. While a vast majority of the students who had the opportunity to participate in iMentor did so, some students did not. In our analysis, we saw that some schools had greater participation rates and stronger implementation than others. Next year, when we add the second cohort of 9th graders to our study, we will also explore if iMentor's effects differ based on the level implementation seen in the schools.

Looking ahead, we will continue to follow both cohorts of students through 2019, which will enable us to gauge the effects of participating in the complete, four-year iMentor College Ready Program. This time frame will also allow us to assess impacts on outcomes that lie at the heart of iMentor's long-term goals—namely, high school graduation and college enrollment.

Executive Summary Notes

[i] Coca, 2014.

[ii] Bailey & Dynarski, 2011.

[iii] Conley, 2010; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001.

[iv] When we collected data for this report, iMentor did not have a benchmark for pair support. Future reports will include pair support measures, such as the number of hours PCs spend supporting each pair and how many times PCs called/communicated with mentors.

[v] We use pseudonyms to protect school identities.

[vi] Bayer et al., 2013.

[vii] We do not have information about students' perceptions of PC support.

[viii] Effect sizes less than .2 are generally accepted as small (Hill et al., 2007). The largest effect size we found was .15, for the College Aspirations outcome.

[ix] Eccles et al., 1993; Erikson, 1986; Furstenberg, 1993.

[x] Surr & Tracey, 2009.

[xi] Chronic Absenteeism is defined as missing 20 or more days of school (approximately 11 percent or more). Being chronically absent has been linked with lower achievement outcomes (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

[xii] A student is considered on track for graduation with a Regents diploma at the end of 9th grade if she has passed at least one Regents exam and completed at least ten course credits by the end of the year.

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